

BONUS! 33 PAGES OF GEAR



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SPECIAL ISSUE

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LOCAL TRIPS TRAILS FOR EVERY HIKER AND REGION
NATIONAL PARKS WHERE TO GO NOW **SKILLS** 49 TIPS FOR WINTER
FUN AND SAFETY **GEAR** THE SEASON'S BEST NEW PRODUCTS

155
FIELD-TESTED
REVIEWS
& TIPS

**PREP FOR
A LONG
TRAIL**

TIPS FROM
A TRIPLE
CROWNER

**EDITORS'
CHOICE
AWARDS**

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Special Issue

Winter Guide

Gear testing at its
finest near Hagerman
Pass, Colorado

65

44

TRIPS

The Quiet Season

Want to feel like you have a national park to yourself? Go now. Here's where.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

57

SKILLS

Easier Than You Think

Master the season with 42 tips on snowshoeing and backcountry skiing. BY MAREN HORJUS

65

GEAR

Editors' Choice Snow Awards

After months of testing and a final shakedown in the Rockies, we unveil the 11 winners—from a weatherproof pack to a better-fitting helmet.

BY THE EDITORS

74

Complete Your Kit

Find what you need among the top products in every category.

skills

29 Pull a Sled

Tame heavy winter loads by letting the snow do the work.

30 Cheat Sheet:

Prep for a Thru-hike

Start with 10 tips from a veteran.

32 Trail Chef:

Italian Night

Upgrade with these flavorful favorites.

34 Photo School:

Star Trails Capture

the night sky like never before.

survival

37 Out Alive:

Paralyzed A slip leaves a hiker unable to move.

40 Saved By:

Ice Start a fire with the frozen stuff. Really.

41 Den Mother:

Frostbite When are my fingers too cold for comfort?

the play list

10 Pacific Crest Trail, CA

It's high time for the high desert.

12 Insider's Guide: Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, CA

Venture into slots, explore badlands, and find solitude in one of the season's best state parks.

14 Done In a Day: Close-to-Home Peaks

Sometimes you don't have to go very far to find the best views.

16 The Experience: Make Fresh Tracks

A fresh blanket of snow affords a sneak peek at backcountry wildlife in action.

18 Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, HI

Chase lava—from a distance—at this dependable flow.

19 Nags Head Woods Preserve, NC

Paddle below oaks, maples, hickories, and beeches in the November-perfect Outer Banks.

19 Life List: Salmo-Priest Wilderness, WA

Lose yourself in this remote refuge.

22 Weekends

Take advantage of Arizona's finest weather, get a front-row seat to a Texas foliage show, and kick off the Southeast's best hiking season in Alabama.

Hike to the cover: Crater Lake by Ian Shive / tandemstock.com.
Beta: page 44

6 #Trailchat
124 Gear testers, reviewed



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GET OUT MORE



STAFF PICKS My coldest hike (get geared up starting on page 65)

Lewis Island in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland, in June: sideways rain, low 40s, and took three hours to warm up after a three-hour hike

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Summit of Mt. Adams, NH, in January: 70-mph winds and windchill of -60°F

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Togwotee Pass, WY, in February: During a NOLS winter camping course, we kept warm by eating butter. On everything.

Yellowstone National Park, February: Cross-country skiing through Geyser Basin at -20°F. It's a great way to see Yellowstone without tourists (more, page 48).

Indian Peaks, CO, in June. I was wearing shorts and got lost for a few hours in a summer snowstorm.

Go to backpacker.com/fieldscouts for their weekly reports.

Mt. St. Helens, WA, in February: Rare sunny sky, 0°F at base, 15 below at the summit

Pemi Wilderness, NH, in February: -35°F and trees a popping

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YOUR OPINIONS, PHOTOS, AND FEATS

Overheard

Senior Content Editor Rachel Zurer's essay about deepening her relationship with her husband through hiking ("Love Like This: Couples Camping," September 2015) prompted you to write in with your own stories of love on the trail. "My boyfriend and I met on top of a mountain. A fellow hiker broke her ankle on the way down and he stopped to help carry her out," writes [Danielle Harvey](#). "Soon after, we started dating."

[Sara Robbins](#) shares a love story that started on our own site: "My wife and I met 12 years ago on backpacker.com. Not only that, at the time we met, she lived 5,000 miles away, in Brazil," she says. "Thank goodness the forum girls got together for a Colorado backpacking trip, and my honey decided to make the trip from Brazil to join us." [*Dear Sara: You're welcome.*]



Some backcountry romances move faster than others. [Caleb "Big Spoon" Miller](#) and his wife [Claire "Hands" Henley](#) got hitched after crossing paths on the Pacific Crest Trail. "We actually met shortly after starting the PCT at the end of April, and we decided to get married after knowing each other just about a month. Some call it crazy," he says. "We call it trail love."

Reader Poll

In August, officials at Yellowstone National Park put down a mother grizzly after she killed and ate a hiker who was traveling alone in the backcountry. We asked our Facebook followers: Should the park have put the bear down?

YOUR VOTES



25%

Yes. That bear was dangerous.

"Grizzlies are apex predators and dangerous enough when they are not man-eaters,"

- Hilary Chambers



75%

No. It's her home, not ours.

"We invite [ourselves] into their homes, then we kill them?"

- Tracy March



Instagram

Night lights

"Best. Campsite. Ever." writes [@MitchPittman](#) of this starry shot, taken on Mt. Sahale in Washington's North Cascades National Park.

Trending

Fall Adventures

There's still plenty of autumn left, and we're here to help you make the most of it. Head to [backpacker.com](#) to learn some seasonal skills.

Plan the Ultimate Autumn Hike

Now you can find [BACKPACKER's](#) favorite trails through your phone's GPS with the free Field Trip app. Get it for Android and iPhone at [fieldtripper.com](#).

Build a Better Campfire

Chilly nights call for toasty flames. Take your fire-building technique to the next level with our skills videos at [backpacker.com/campfire](#).

Tell a Ghost Story

Want to see your friends quake in their hiking boots? Master the art of telling scary stories with our tips at [backpacker.com/ghoststories](#).

Find Fall Colors

The autumn fireworks never end on our website. Check out the best leaf shots from readers and professional photographers at [backpacker.com/fallcolors](#).

Taste the Harvest

It's pumpkin spice season. Find autumn's tastiest recipes on our Fall Eats board on Pinterest.





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Backtracking

Our October issue crowned the bighorn sheep (pictured below) king of the rut (page 33). But as reader [Mike McMullin](#) noticed, we used a picture of the closely related mouflon instead.



Overheard

"Your magazine has been with me now for about 10 years—Iraq in 2007 and now Afghanistan for my last one-year deployment (I hope)," writes [Rob Garcia](#), who's in Kandahar with the Indiana Army National Guard. "It always has great information and is a real treat when it shows up with my care packages from my wife and kids." [How's this for a treat:](#) We sent Garcia a JanSport Klamath 55 pack to thank him for his service, and taking the time to write.

Spotted

Who says GPS is killing young peoples' map skills? Reader [Anna Clark](#)'s 1-year-old son, [Ellington](#), checks the charts en route to Richmond Pass, outside of Ouray, Colorado.



Down With Slobs

Reader [John Scanlan](#) wrote in to chew out the unknown camper who left a campfire burning at Jay Cooke State Park, Minnesota. "While setting up my tent, a log remaining in the ashes developed a flame, which I quickly doused," he says. "Please, please, please, don't ever do that again." We asked our Facebook fans: What's the worst thing you've ever found in a campsite?

DANGEROUS ↑ ↓

"Live bullets hidden in a fire ring."

— Don Pettrone

"A meth lab."

— Sherrill Corntassel

"An abandoned tent with a pissed-off rattlesnake inside."

— Aaron Adams

"Someone dumped their hot coals in a half-full trash can and left camp. The can was then fully engulfed in flames."

— Tim Godfrey

"A baggie of shrooms."

— Stephanie Hare

"Gut piles left by deer hunters. In bear country. In a designated campsite."

— Laura Peitersen

"Poo. Lots and lots of human poo."

— Jeff Gauthier

"Campers feeding the wildlife (right next to a 'don't feed wildlife' sign)."

— Hilary Benoit

"Dirty diapers hanging in a bush like Christmas ornaments."

— Sara Goltry

DUMB



BE THE GUY WITH THE STORY ABOUT THE BEAR.

YETI COOLERS ARE BUILT TO BE INDESTRUCTIBLE AND KEEP ICE FOR DAYS.
BUILT FOR GOING PLACES OTHERS DON'T. BUILT FOR UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS.
BUILT FOR KEEPING GRIZZLIES OUT OF YOUR LUNCH. BUILT FOR THE WILD.



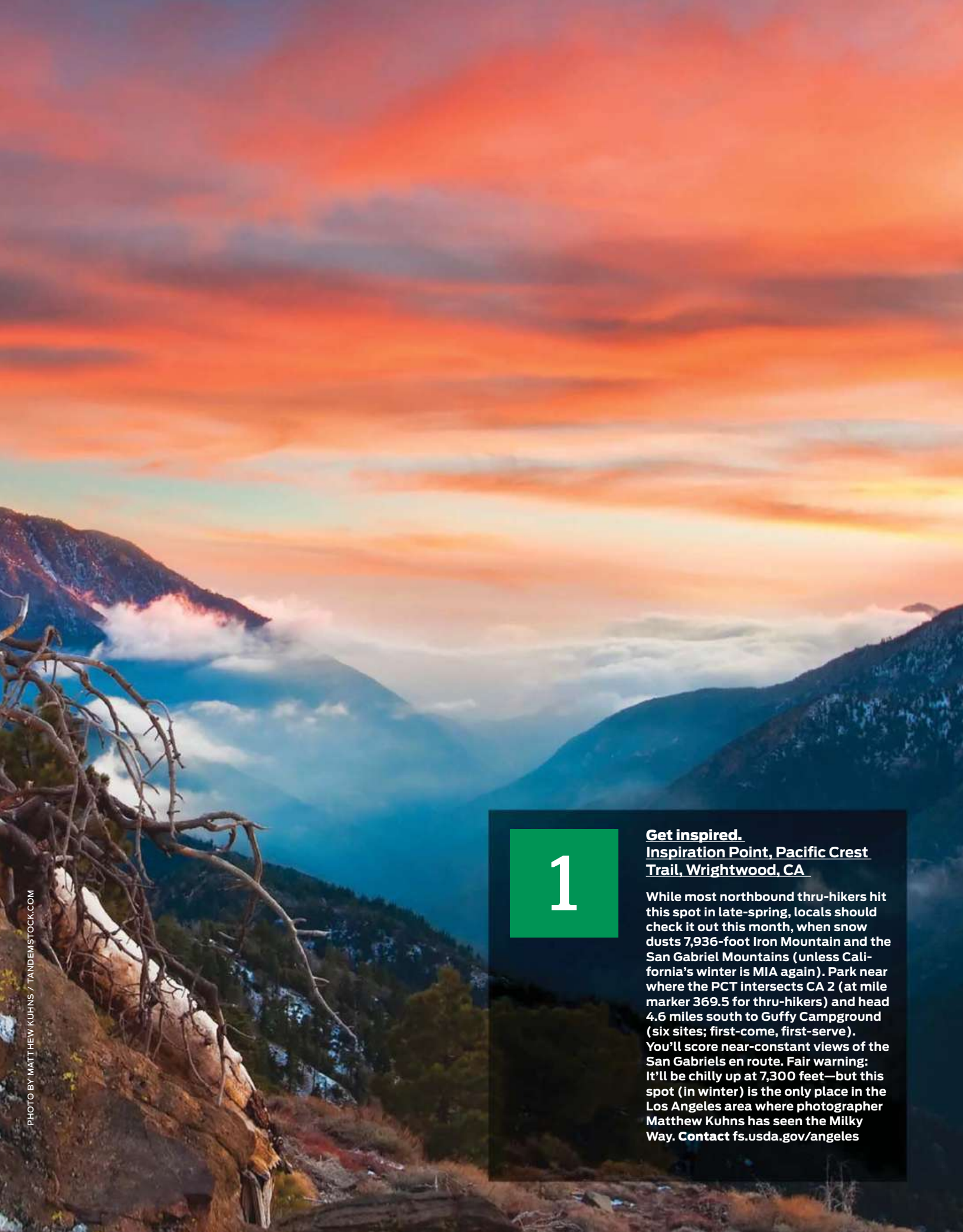
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11.2015



the play list

This month's top
trips and picks



1

Get inspired.
Inspiration Point, Pacific Crest Trail, Wrightwood, CA

While most northbound thru-hikers hit this spot in late-spring, locals should check it out this month, when snow dusts 7,936-foot Iron Mountain and the San Gabriel Mountains (unless California's winter is MIA again). Park near where the PCT intersects CA 2 (at mile marker 369.5 for thru-hikers) and head 4.6 miles south to Guffy Campground (six sites; first-come, first-serve). You'll score near-constant views of the San Gabriels en route. Fair warning: It'll be chilly up at 7,300 feet—but this spot (in winter) is the only place in the Los Angeles area where photographer Matthew Kuhns has seen the Milky Way. **Contact** fs.usda.gov/angeles



INSIDER'S

2

GUIDE

Warm Haven Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, CA

Winter blues? This SoCal desert hideaway has the cure: With “cold-season” daytime temps in the 60s and 70s, now is the perfect time to wander its cactus-filled canyons, scramble rocky peaks, and scope for desert wildlife.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

The insider

Two guidebooks (*Hiking in Anza-Borrego Desert*, volumes one and two) weren't enough to exhaust Robin Halford's knowledge of the park: The volunteer hiking leader for the Anza-Borrego Desert Natural History Association and local gift shop owner is currently working on volume three.

Best overnight

Lack of reliable water sources in the park makes backpacking in Anza-Borrego best for shorter trips, like the 10.4-mile overnight loop connecting Rockhouse and Butler Canyons in the Santa Rosa Mountains Recreation Area. Park where the road splits between the two canyons (4WD required; high-clearance 2WD cars can usually make it the first 7 miles, but you'll have to walk the final mile to the trailhead). Head into Rockhouse, where you'll have to scramble across several boulderfields to reach Hidden Spring about 3.5 miles in (it's more of a seep, Halford says; pack at least a gallon per person per day). Backtrack 100 feet from the spring and take an unsigned trail up to Jackass Flat, then scout a campsite on the wide bench (clear from flash flood danger). The next day, head through taller, narrower Butler Canyon to reach your car.

Flora-filled dayhike

The wildflower blooms at Anza-Borrego are the stuff of legend, with hundreds of species lighting up the desert when conditions are just right (the best shows require the perfect combination of rainfall, temperature, and sunshine). “If it's a good bloom in the spring, Hornblende Canyon can be just fantastic,” Halford says. To stroll among blossoms like apricot mallow, purple Canterbury bells, and orange

PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) MITCH MILLER / FINE EARTH PHOTOGRAPHY, RON NIEBRUGGE / WILDNATUREIMAGES.COM



apricot yarrow, hike the 3.8-mile loop up Hornblende, over a small saddle, and down Box Canyon in March. No flower explosion this year? No problem: In these canyons, iconic desert plants such as hedgehog cactus, barrel cactus, agave, and prickly pear are a sure thing.

Wildlife spotting

The park's canyons and rocky mountain slopes provide a refuge for a few hundred endangered peninsular bighorn sheep (as well as kit foxes, bobcats, mountain lions, jackrabbits, and more than 70 species of reptiles and amphibians). For your best shot at glimpsing the elusive bighorns, head to the steep terrain they favor. Halford's favorite scoping spot is 3,626-foot Sunset Mountain, a 3.5-mile out-and-back trip. Drive 4.3 miles up the Pinyon Wash (4WD required), park, and hike east, slaloming boulders and cacti, to a saddle on the peak's western side (there's no official trail, but the route is straightforward). Skirt the northern flank and follow a ridge to a "sheep guzzler," or park-maintained seasonal water tank, then top out for views over the Vallecito Mountains and the Salton Sea.

Car camp with a view

The vista over miles of wrinkled badlands at Fonts Point draws crowds of wine sippers and sunset gazers most nights: "Fonts is beautiful, but everyone goes there," Halford says. Better: the similarly sweeping views from Vista del Malpais just to the east. Best: You can drive to within about .1 mile of the overlook (high-clearance car required; 4WD recommended) and set up camp for a solo sunset show chased with mind-blowing stargazing. "It's very unlikely you'll see anyone else," Halford says. (No reservations or permit required, but keep your vehicle within one car length from the road.)

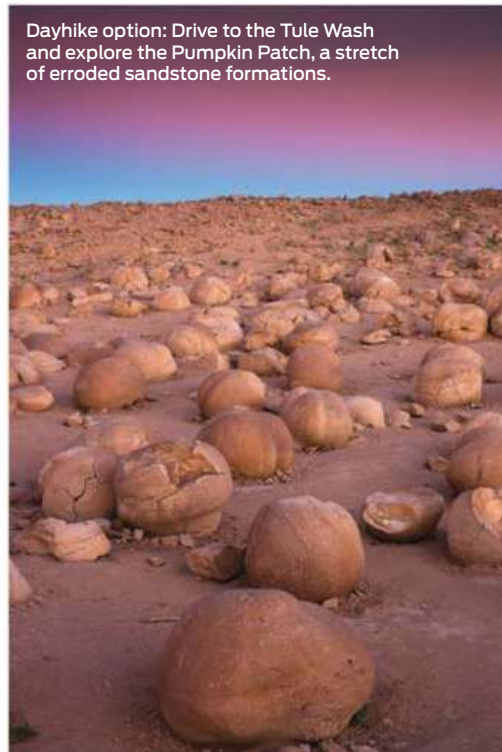
Desert essentials

Halford never leaves home without a multitool with pliers to extract cholla cactus spines. "No matter where you go, you learn fairly quickly that the cholla really do seem to jump on you," she says.

Trip planner

Season November to April for cooler weather (March for flora) **Permit** None
Contact parks.ca.gov

Dayhike option: Drive to the Tule Wash and explore the Pumpkin Patch, a stretch of eroded sandstone formations.



On Mission Peak, sometimes the bird's-eye vantage of the fog is even better than ocean views.

DONE IN A DAY

3

Quick-Hit Views

You usually need to work hard to earn the best vistas—but not these. Race to see-forever views on these short summit missions. **BY KRISTEN POPE**

**Mission Peak,
East Bay
Regional Park
District**
CALIFORNIA

Hoof it up to 2,517-foot Mission Peak and you'll be rewarded with one of the Bay Area's best vantages: See San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, the Diablo Range (east and south), and, on a clear day, the Sierra Nevada (way east). Like most close-to-home peaks, Mission draws crowds, but you can beat them by taking the lesser-known, 4-mile Peak Trail to the top (it's longer than the Hidden Valley Trail, but it better spreads out the 2,100-foot vertical gain). Park at Ohlone College in Fremont and follow the grassy slope the whole way. Ignore the cows grazing on the hillsides and look out for deer, coyotes, raptors, and vultures, which are common year-round. **Contact** ebparks.org

**Harney Peak,
Black Elk
Wilderness**
SOUTH DAKOTA

Bag 7,242-foot Harney—America's highest peak east of the Rockies—and you'll score wrap-around views of granite cliffs and spires, the Black Hills, the backside of Mt. Rushmore, and, on the right day, as far as Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana. Since you only climb 1,100 feet on the 3.3-mile hike, you'll have extra energy to climb to the top of the decommissioned 1930s CCC fire tower. Expect to have it to yourself in November. Head out on Trail #9 in Custer State Park, crossing into the Black Elk Wilderness, and peel off onto the summit spur near mile 3. Loop 3.5 miles back on Trails #3 and #4 to check out the spires of Little Devil's Tower. **Contact** bit.do/CusterSP

**McAfee Knob,
Catawba**
VIRGINIA

Like a high dive above Catawba Valley, McAfee Knob may just offer one of the best photo ops along the Appalachian Trail. From the skinny, sandstone fin, soak in 270-degree views, including North Mountain to the west, the Tinker Cliffs to the north, and the Roanoke Valley to the east. Come mid-October, the valley's birch, red maple, dogwood, and sassafras trees turn fiery shades, making it even better. From the parking area on VA 311, follow the white AT blazes north for 4 miles (gaining an easy 1,740 feet) to the McAfee Knob Spur Trail; take it 30 yards to the edge (beware the drop-offs). **Contact** fs.usda.gov/gwj



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4

THE EXPERIENCE

After a Storm: Fresh Tracks

Play follow the leader on a new blanket of snow.

BY ANNETTE MCGIVNEY

→ **THREE FEET OF FRESH SNOW** sits on top of a layer of old, hard snow, making the steep hill even tougher to ascend than usual. It's as if I'm marching on a frozen lake with a 10-pound bucket of concrete attached to each foot. My arms flail at my sides in an attempt to stall the constant sinking and backward slide of my boots on unseen ice. Nearby, my dog Sunny, a 65-pound lab, is submerged in the powder but pushing ever forward like a panting snowplow.

I have hiked cross-country around this area called Mars Hill in northern Arizona's Coconino National Forest nearly every day for the past 20 years. I do it religiously, no matter the conditions. In winter, when a single storm can smother my hometown of Flagstaff in 5 feet of snow, it may be too blustery for shoveling my driveway but not for trekking 7 miles up the hill and through the woods and back.

I start walking from the house and eventually make it to the forest. The 9°F air on this

frigid January afternoon burns my lungs and freezes the insides of my nostrils.

About halfway up a 400-foot climb, I stop to catch my breath and look back at the tracks Sunny and I have made. They proclaim, unmistakably, a determined, tunneling dog and an equally determined, postholing human were here. In summer and fall when the ground is dry, travelers pass through invisibly, leaving only their scent. But in winter, every creature traversing this forest leaves an impression, a chronicle of its existence frozen in time.

As I trudge higher I study the tracks of others. During these daily hikes, I keep tabs on who has been out and about: mice, ravens, rabbits, bobcats, foxes, deer, and mountain lions. My imagination wanders with the paw prints and I try to visualize the creatures that made them. Sometimes I discover that animals followed the trail I broke through the previous day's fresh snow and other times I follow their prints. They have their routines—

searching for food, running to and from their dens. Sometimes the snow is sprinkled with fresh blood and tufts of fur. Occasionally, I come across the track of another human and it catches me by surprise. Who is the owner of this very large boot print and what did he see? But I'm usually blissfully alone, methodically putting one foot in front of the other, just another mammal on the move.

This time, I top out on a plateau where I find dimples in the snow left by a jackrabbit. I suddenly sense I am not alone and look up. About 3 feet away, a big, old doe stands calmly, seemingly unfazed by my presence. After all these years of walking in each other's tracks, I guess we need no introduction.

"Hello," I say instinctively.

The doe looks at me for another second and then slowly high-steps through the powder on her way downhill. I continue postholing across the plateau, following my dog who is following the rabbit. ■

5

Call it the hiker's Turkey Trot.

Take your Thanksgiving spirit outdoors. Pay reverence to your Butterball's cousins by looking for a wild tom on these hikes.

Conecuh Trail

Conecuh National Forest, AL

Scan for eastern wild turkeys near the Alabama-Florida state line on this 22.5-miler. **Contact** fs.usda.gov/alabama



Gibbons Creek Wildlife Art Trail

Steigerwald NWR, WA
Wander through a riparian zone (Merriam's wild turkeys here) on this 2.2-miler. **Contact** trails.gorgefriends.org

North Point Trail

North-South Lake, NY

Tour the Kaaterskill Wild Forest—chock-full of eastern wild turkeys—on this 7-mile loop. **Contact** dec.ny.gov

Willow Falls Trail

Willow River State Park, WI

This 3-miler takes you through eastern wild turkey habitat en route to 45-foot Willow Falls. **Contact** dnr.wi.gov



Wolf Mountain Trail

Pedernales Falls State Park, TX

Look for predator (coyote) and prey (Rio Grande wild turkey) on this 6-mile out-and-back. **Contact** tpwd.texas.gov

No. 6

Embrace the cold.

Hey, it's what owls do, and if you follow suit, you may be able to spot one. Expect snowy owls to return to the north Atlantic Coast from the Arctic in November as the mercury drops. Head out to open beach trails (that resemble arctic tundra) for a chance at spotting them.



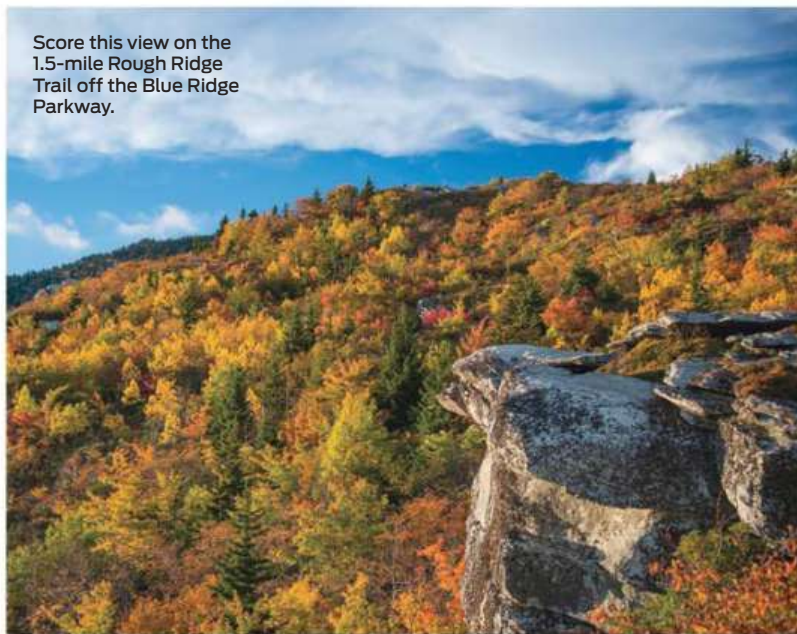
IN THE CLUB

7

...in which we honor the best hiking clubs in the country.

→ The Carolina Mountain Club may be the most well-rounded club we've heard of: 175 hikes each year, 400 miles of maintained trails (including part of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail), and it's been going 90 years strong. In addition to the hikes (ranging from a mile to 12 miles), members can complete different challenges (such as bagging all 40 of the Southeast's 6,000-footers or hiking all 400 miles of trail in the Pisgah Ranger District) to earn patches. **Contact** carolinamountainclub.org

Score this view on the 1.5-mile Rough Ridge Trail off the Blue Ridge Parkway.



No. 8

Come through with flying colors.

Fall foliage may be a thing of the past north of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, but come November, the Southeast (and much of the Midwest) is hitting its prime. Visit foliagenetwork.com to find an up-to-date color report and hit the trails.

9

Warm up.
Hawaii Volcanoes National
Park, Hawaii

Whether you live here or are just taking a break from winter, there's a better way to warm up than lounging on the beach. Track down the lava flows on Kilauea, a shield volcano on the Big Island. An active vent, Pu'u O'o, sends continuous flows down the volcano's southeast flank, but, since the lava paths are always changing, there's no standard route to go see them. Instead, says photographer Grant Ordelheide, hook up with a guided tour (\$40; lavahikes.com) in the nearby town of Kalapana. From there, you'll walk a few miles over otherworldly lava rock toward where the lava spills, either into or outside the park. Aim for a sunset hike so you can better see the glow. **Contact** nps.gov/havo





PHOTOS BY GRANT ORDELHEIDE / TANDEMSTOCK.COM
BEN HERNDON / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

10

**Catch late-breaking fall.
Nags Head Woods Preserve
(The Nature Conservancy), NC**

Between the salty waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Roanoke Sound, find this underused tract of ponds, swamps, dunes, and, by the first week of November, kaleidoscopic oaks, hickories, beeches, maples, and sweet gums. Hop on the .5-mile Discovery Trail (one of seven possible paths), or, for a more up-close-and-personal vantage of the leaf show, do as photographer Ben Herndon did, and put in a canoe near the Discovery trailhead and paddle .3 mile through the old-growth maritime forest. "All the fallen leaves looked like goldfish," he says. **Contact** [bit.do/NagsHeadWoods](https://bit.ly/3d0NagsHeadWoods)

No. 11

Work off your Thanksgiving dinner.

Serving size, shmerving size. Most Americans toss self-control to the wind, consuming roughly 4,500 calories over the course of a Thanksgiving dinner. That's 350 calories in stuffing, 320 in turkey lathered in 100 calories of gravy, 230 in mashed potatoes, 100 in cranberry sauce, and about 3,400 in seconds, thirds, and miscellaneous sides and desserts. Desperate times call for desperate measures, so here are the quickest ways to burn that meal in the backcountry.

**BACKCOUNTRY
SKI FOR
13 HOURS**

(VARIES BASED
ON AMOUNT OF

**DOWNHILL
CRUISING**

AND ALCHOLIC DRINKING).

**BREAK TRAIL FOR
9 HOURS
IN SNOWSHOES
(SEE PAGE 57
FOR INSPIRATION).**

**SPEND
11 HOURS
DIGGING A
SNOW CAVE**

LARGE ENOUGH FOR
THE WHOLE FAMILY
—A FUN POST-MEAL

ACTIVITY.

**CHOP
WOOD
FOR 13 HOURS.
ALL HUT VISITORS
AFTER YOU
WILL BE
GRATEFUL.**

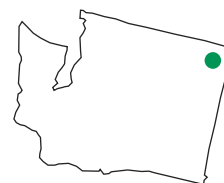


Angel Island

12

Hit the beach.

Blue skies and empty trails—sounds like November on NorCal's coast. Take advantage on the 10.5-mile Bear Valley-Sky-Wittenberg loop (plenty of beach access points) in Point Reyes National Seashore or head over to Angel Island and loop 5.9 miles to the top of Mt. Livermore for wraparound views. **Contacts** nps.gov/pore; bit.do/AngelIsland



The Quietest Rainforest

In Washington's wild corner, any voice heard is most likely imagined. BY AARON THEISEN

→ **I EXPECT TO SEE BEARS** during my two-day trip through northeast Washington's Salmo-Priest Wilderness. The black bear, of course, isn't expecting to see me. As I crouch at the small creek to filter water, the bruin's startled *harrumph* gives me barely enough time to turn around and catch its clawing, cartoon scramble down a spruce and off into the brush. Water filter and adrenaline both sufficiently pumped, I chuckle with sympathy at its surprise.

I've been coming to this quiet corner of Washington for years, drawn by the 43,000-acre wilderness' all-encompassing solitude. Instead of other hikers, the Salmo-Priest, which is the wettest spot in eastern Washington, boasts megafauna like wolves, grizzlies, and mountain caribou. But with all that quiet, the noise of the creeks that braid the cedars and subalpine meadows becomes more than just white noise—it sounds like whispered conversation. When I walk in the Salmo-Priest, I must remind myself that any voice but my own is conjured in my head.

I had set out to hike the 19-mile Salmo-Priest Loop earlier in the day in hopes of catching an autumn full moon from the Shedroof Divide, the high ridge that straddles the Idaho-Washington state line. I descended through a rainforest of 200-foot cedars to cross and then parallel the South Salmo River, where moss and maidenhair ferns swallow the trail.

After my run-in with the bruin, I camp in a small notch on the Shedroof Divide just below the fire lookout on 6,829-foot Little Snowy Top. From a beargrass-clad bald I watch the sun set behind the off-kilter pyramid of 7,210-foot Hooknose Mountain to the west while a full moon creeps above Priest Lake to the south.

The next morning, chastened by my bear encounter earlier, I make extra noise while crossing meadows filled with huckleberry bushes on the divide. Fire-charred snags frame non-stop views north to the spires of southern British Columbia's Selkirks. As I bend down to top off my water in the river, I hear more voices. I tell myself it's just from the stream, but then a couple of hikers come around a bend. Now it's my turn to be surprised by the presence of humans. But if there's a place in the Northwest that still has the capacity to surprise, it's here in the Salmo-Priest.

DO IT The 19-mile Salmo Loop is best as an overnight (camp in the saddle below Little Snowy Top). Do it clockwise to end with increasingly impressive views. **Trailhead** 48.955467, -117.081501; 26 miles northeast of Metaline Falls off Forest Road 2220 **Season** Late spring through late fall (eastern Washington is generally mild); expect most active wildlife in October and November (but be prepared for early snow). **Contact** fs.usda.gov/colville



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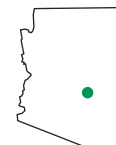
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Photo: Gabe Rogel

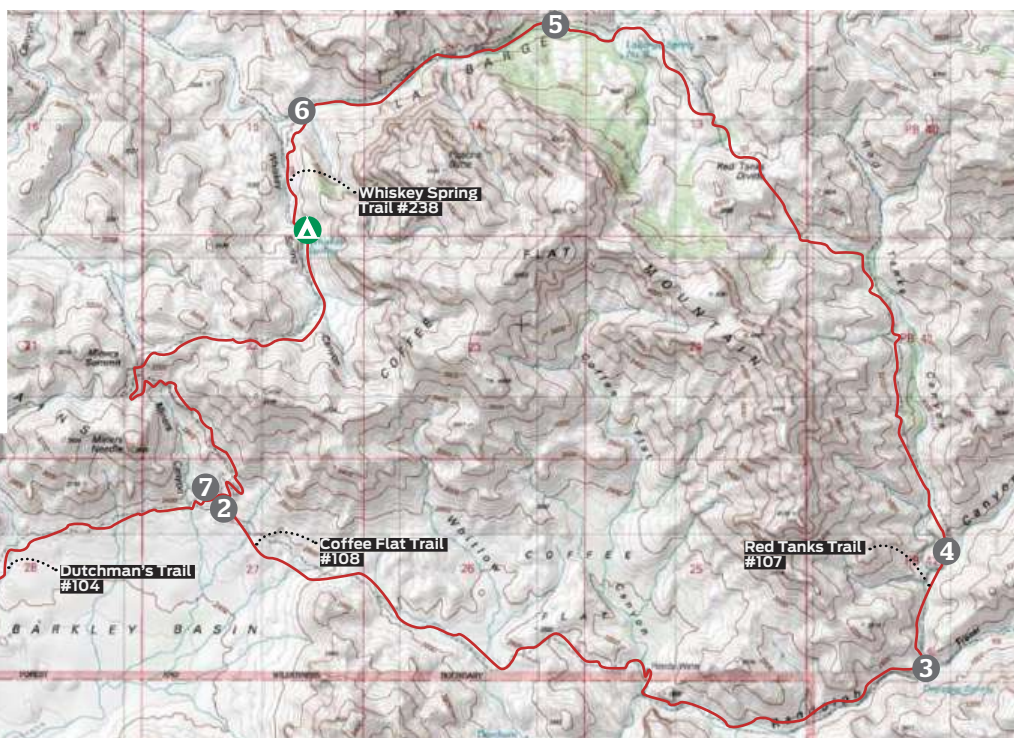
Athlete: Monica Purington



WEEKENDS

14

1 of 3



Treasure in the Desert

Superstition Wilderness, Arizona

Legend has it that there's a fortune in gold hidden somewhere in these desert peaks of the Superstitions. A German supposedly found it in the 19th century and kept its whereabouts a secret. But so far, all I've found is merciless catclaw. I've spent the better part of the day scampering up barely-there trails and sidestepping ornery rattlesnakes. But, after a 1,200-foot climb deposits me on Red Tanks Divide, the high point of this 19.2-mile loop, the desert opens up in all directions, naked stone and towering saguaro glowing in the afternoon sun. I think I've found the prize. BY QUINN HARPER



Turn-by-turn

From the Peralta trailhead

- ① Follow the **Dutchman's Trail #104** for 2.7 miles to a fork.
- ② Continue along the valley floor, following the **Coffee Flat Trail #108** to mile 7.1.
- ③ Make a sharp left to head north up Randolph Canyon on the **Red Tanks Trail #107**, and follow cairns to a junction at mile 7.7.
- ④ Split left (continuing on the Red Tanks Trail) and follow the canyon northwest, cresting the divide near mile 10.1, to a junction at mile 11.5.
- ⑤ Head through Upper La Barge Box Canyon to mile 13.
- ⑥ Veer south onto the **Whiskey Spring Trail #238** and follow it 3.6 miles back to the original fork (head south through Miners Canyon near mile 15).
- ⑦ Retrace your steps 2.7 miles on the Dutchman's Trail #104 to the trailhead.



Campsite

Whiskey Spring (mile 13.7)

Select a shaded spot (first-come, first-serve) beneath the cottonwoods, which turn yellow by November. You can count on Whiskey Spring to flow in fall after the summer monsoons (it can flow in springtime, but call ahead to check). Head clockwise (hitting this spot at mile 5.5) for a shorter first day.

Trip stats

Distance:
19.2 miles

Time:
2 days

Difficulty:
★★★★★



Season

Come November, the temperatures have dropped from the hellacious triple digits to the heavenly low 70s, and summer monsoons have replenished most water sources. Temperatures remain moderate through April, when wildflowers and saguaros bloom, but water becomes scarcer.



Water

Find water at Whiskey Spring (and sometimes in *tinajas* in Red Tanks Canyon) in autumn. Don't expect much in late spring (call ahead to check). Note that there is reliable water (even in dry years) at La Barge Spring, 2 miles beyond the Whiskey Spring Trail junction (mile 13), on the Red Tanks Trail.

DO IT Trailhead 33.397446, -111.347916; 34 miles east of Mesa on Peralta Rd. **Season** November through May **Permits** None **Custom map** bit.do/BPmapRedTanks (\$15) **Contact** bit.do/SuperstitionWild **Trip data** backpacker.com/RedTanks

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Live Vibrantly.



Twice the foliage: The Sabinal River (1.6 miles east of the junction at mile 1.5) reflects fall color.



400-foot climb to the top of the hillock is enough to deter most hikers (who instead opt for the pond area), so expect solitude. There are a handful of established spots (\$10; online reservation recommended), and don't forget to top off your water at Can Creek before making the climb; it's dry up here. Keep an eye out for red-tailed hawks overhead.



Foliage

The park's namesake big-tooth maples turn in November. Expect a killer bird's-eye vantage from the overlook in Area B, but check the Lost Maples Foliage Report for current information on where and when at bit.do/LostMaplesFoliage.



Canyon detour

From basecamp at Area B: Head about a mile east on the East Trail to the Grotto, where maidenhair ferns cover limestone canyon walls. Continue about .5 mile to aptly named Monkey Rock.

DO IT Trailhead 29.814899, -99.575830; 6 miles north of Vanderpool off Ranch Rd. 187
Season September through May; late fall for foliage, mid-spring for flowers
Permit None
Custom map bit.do/BPmapLostMaples (\$15)
Contact bit.do/LostMaples
Trip data backpacker.com/LostMaples

Trip stats

Distance: 6.5 miles
Time: 2 days
Difficulty: ★★★★★

Late fall's best spot

Lost Maples State Natural Area, Texas

Can Creek cuts a vein through the woodlands, twisting through the vermillion bigtooth maples and out of sight to the horizon. It's the only feature that gives the expanse of color any definition. Elsewhere in the country, hikers are putting away their boots and packs for the winter, but here in Lost Maples, I'm about to set up a picture-perfect campsite on an outcrop 400 feet above the fall scenery. Tomorrow, I'll tour the woods, limestone canyons, and crystalline streams that set this area apart from other Texas wilds, and, since it's just a few hours from Austin, I can take my time, just like the seasons. BY JUDY PAUL



Turn-by-turn

From the East-West trailhead

① Head .4 mile north on the East-West Trail to a fork.

② Stay right to complete the loop counterclockwise (for a longer first day, go clockwise) and reach a junction at mile 1.1.
③ Head .4 mile north (hiker's right) on the East Trail to another fork; split left and take the .4-mile path toward Area B. ④

④ Retrace your steps .7 mile to an intersection of the East and West Trails.
⑤ Peel off to the west and follow the West Trail 1.1 miles.
⑥ Turn south at the junction to stay on the West Trail as it wraps 2.8 miles back to the trailhead (merge with the East-West Trail near mile 6.1 and retrace your steps .4 mile to close the lasso loop).



Campsite

Area B (mile 1.9)

Pitch your tent beneath the oaks in Campsite B. The steep,

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No. 16

Pilfer Junior's
Halloween candy.

But you're an adult, so be smart about it. Don't hoard any one candy (suspicious!) and channel all that sugar into hiking energy. Here, we ranked the pickins by caloric density.

Peanut M&Ms 73 cal, 15 g (Fun size)

The peanut-centered variety offers extra protein. It's more than worth the risk of a little melted chocolate.



Reese's Peanut Butter Cup 87 cal, 17 g

Peanut butter and chocolate: a hiker's best friends.



Snickers 80 cal, 17 g (Fun size)

The full-size bars are a favorite in high-altitude climbing circles.



Skittles 61 cal, 16 g (Fun size)

They don't quite match up to their chocolatey counterparts, but they also don't melt, so there's that.



Smarties 25 cal, 7 g

Prepackaged, don't sweat or melt, and a dense bit of energy. Plus, kids will not miss them.



17

Embrace fall's glory on the newly completed 230-mile Bay Circuit Trail around Boston.

No time to complete it before Old Man Winter comes knocking? That's OK. Pick up the AMC's brand-new guidebook and tackle a shorter section (amcstore.outdoors.com). Or trust us: We like the 4-mile segment through Ward Reservation for its bogs and Holt Hill, the highest point in Essex County.

WEEKENDS

18

3 of 3

Eternal Summer

DeSoto State Park,
Alabama



Stretching out across a sun-soaked boulder, I consider going for another dip in Laurel Creek. A 6-foot waterfall spills over a limestone ledge into the pool, tempting me. I'm midway through a 7.7-mile loop and the summery scene is perfect—except the deep gold hickories and reddish maples give away my secret: It's late October. But with 70°F days, year-round falls, empty trails and shelters, and this scene, it's clear that it's prime time in the south right now. That settles it: One more soak. BY VICTORIA STOPP



Turn-by-turn From the DeSoto Picnic Area

- 1 Follow the orange-blazed Laurel Falls Trail south to the park road at mile 2.
- 2 Join the Family Bike Loop Trail and continue .4 mile north to a junction.
- 3 Head west on the Never-Never Land Trail, wrapping counterclockwise to a fork at mile 3.9.
- 4 Turn south onto the unnamed path and walk .6 mile to the Never-Never Land Shelter (continue .2 mile to reach a stream).
- 5 Retrace your steps to the junction.
- 6 Head less than .1 mile east to another junction.
- 7 Rejoin the Laurel Falls Trail and take it 2 miles back to the trailhead and picnic area. Or, for new scenery, take it .4 mile and link up with the Lost Falls Trail south of Laurel Creek; take this path another 1.2 miles before merging with Laurel Falls Trail for the final .5 mile to the trailhead.



Campsite Never-Never Land Shelter (mile 4.5)

Kick back in the swankiest shelter in the area: three walls, wood floor, and metal roof. Get water at a seasonal stream .2 mile south (usually flowing through winter, but call ahead to check). Note: Backcountry camping only allowed in the park's two shelters (see info on the other, below); reservation required (\$17; one party allowed). At least you won't have to share.



Foliage

Hickories and red and silver maples hit their primes by mid-October, but color lingers into mid-November.



Quarry

For a primo foliage view, visit the 1930s CCC quarry. From the fork at mile 2.4, head a mile east. Stadium seating-like

ledges surround the football field-size quarry; pick a spot and peer across the basin to the fall color. The park's other shelter is here, too. (It doesn't have walls, so bring a tent if rain threatens.)



Waterfalls

Cascades litter this route; don't miss 6-footers Laurel Falls and Lost Falls on the Lost Falls Trail on the back end of the trip.

DO IT Trailhead

34.501053, -85.618494; 13 miles west of Cloudland, GA, on DeSoto Pkwy. **Season** Year-round; summer for best swimming (but it's humid) and fall for foliage **Permits** None **Custom map** bit.do/BPmapDeSoto (\$15) **Contact** bit.do/DeSotoSP **Trip data** backpacker.com/DeSoto

Trip stats

Distance: 7.7 miles
Time: 2 days
Difficulty: ★★★★★

No. 19

Enjoy the South.

Most of the country is packing up shop right around now, but by November, hikers in San Antonio can finally shut off the A/C and go outside without withering. Kick off hiking season with the 2-mile Vista Loop Trail through a dwarf forest in Friedrich Wilderness Park. **Contact** bit.do/FriedrichPark

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THE BRANDS USING IT



Skills

Pull a Sled

Take the sting out of monster winter loads—including cold-weather gear and luxe food and drink for a hut trip—by hauling a pulk sled. Do it right with tips from polar adventurer Eric Larsen.

1) Assess your route to determine whether a pulk is even feasible. Steep slopes, rocky terrain, and narrow trails are much easier with a pack instead of sled. Look for wilderness areas with fire roads that access prime backcountry territory. **2) Tie your sled to your backpack's hip-belt.** If you don't want to use your pack (or it doesn't have attachment points), opt for a chest harness, which won't slide down like a climbing harness. (Note: Attach the sled directly to your pack hipbelt, never the pack bag, to improve stability and leverage.) **3) Determine the best way to attach the sled: ropes or rigid poles.** Ropes enhance your mobility, absorb shock well, and are affordable. But they won't keep the sled from overtaking you downhill, and the sled will cut corners. Rigid poles force the sled to trail you downhill, and they stabilize the sled on slopes. Downside: They cost more, and you have to unhook anytime you want to go back to your sled. As a general rule, choose ropes for mellow terrain and rigid poles for harder stuff. **4) Pack everything in one or two duffels, and then put these inside your sled.** This makes moving gear easier when you arrive at your destination. **5) Stow the heaviest items low and near the center of the sled.** Making it top heavy will cause it to tip. Put the lightest items near the front, making the sled much easier to lift and drag over an obstacle. **6) If you get stuck traversing a slope with the sled running downhill, tie a 6-foot length of cordelette to the back and have a friend control the sled from the rear.** (A ski pole looped through the back lashing strap also works in a pinch.) Buy that friend a beer back in town. **7) Learn to say no.** Once your companions see you have a sled, they'll want to add "just one more thing."

Tip Test sled hauling without a big investment with the Paris Pro Expedition Sled (\$38; check hardware stores).

Sleds perform best on level terrain, like this frozen lake in Grand Teton National Park.

cheat sheet

11.2015

Prep For a Thru-Hike

Start planning and training for next year's long trail now.

THE EXPERT Justin "Trauma" Lichter has logged more than 35,000 trail miles since 2002, including the triple crown (PCT, AT, and CDT). Earlier this year, he was a part of the first successful winter thru-hike of the PCT. He is the author of the backpacking and hiking guide *Trail Tested*.

GET FIT FIRST

Avoid injury and enjoy your first few weeks on the trail. Make dayhiking with a loaded pack part of your training routine (starting at least three months before your trip). Begin with an empty pack and work up to your planned weight and daily distance. Increase mileage gradually and vary weight to help your body break in. If you go heavy one day, lighten up the next to allow for recovery. Wear the type of shoes you plan to hike in to prep your feet, as well.

4,800 = 2.5
CALORIES/DAY LBS. OF FOOD/DAY

"Hiker hunger" kicks in after a few weeks. For efficiency, make sure there is no water weight in your food and shoot for at least 120 calories per ounce (such as with nuts, chocolate, and dried coconut).

PROTECT YOUR FOOD

Bears get all the press, but mice do most of the thieving. Tips: Use the odor-proof LOKSAK OPSAK (\$9 and up; loksak.com), avoid cooking and eating where you camp, and hang your food.



MAKE AN ITINERARY

Everyone will tell you that you won't stick to it, and that's true. But for safety, you should have a general idea of where you will be at any given time. Share your itinerary with a friend or family member.

PLAN ON CELL SERVICE WEEKLY

On most major U.S. long trails, cell service is likely every four to 10 days. If you're using your phone as a camera, make sure to leave it in airplane mode.



SET SMALL GOALS

Don't start hiking with your mind on a point 2,000 miles ahead. View the trail as a bunch of short sections between resupply stations, and each town as its own success.

DON'T PLAN ALL YOUR FOOD

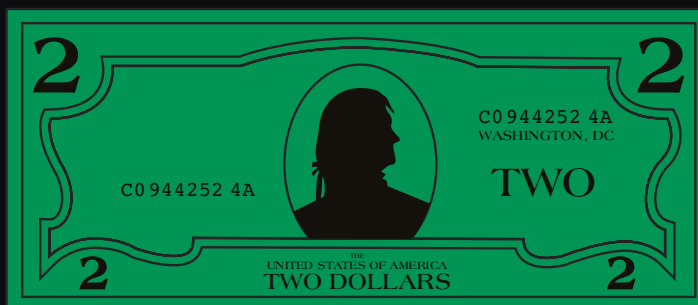
Common rookie mistake: planning, packaging, and mailing your food for the whole hike before you leave. But after two months of apple cinnamon oatmeal, you'll want something else, and it's hard to predict what might sound appetizing when you're on the trail. Every few hundred miles, at resupply towns, shop for food you're craving and mail it to your next two to three stops.



THINK ABOUT WEATHER (BUT NOT TOO MUCH)

Being over-prepared is not always a good thing. Don't carry a sleeping bag that's 20 degrees warmer than necessary "just in case."

Plan a base weight (all gear minus food, water, and fuel) of 10 pounds or less. Consult a gear shop near your intended long trail—or one with specific know-how on long-distance hiking—for advice. "I've encountered many hikers who bought from big-box stores and ended up buying all new gear while on the trail," Lichter says. If you don't live near the trail, it's still worth calling a regional store for tips.



1 MILE

- The average cost of a thru-hike after purchasing gear: \$2/mile.
- Budget at least \$15 per day on food (that's included in total).
- Save money by limiting or sharing town lodging.

Get more long-trail planning help with our new online course. Preregister at backpacker.com/courses.

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Photo: Jerome Sullivan

FROST LINE PARKA

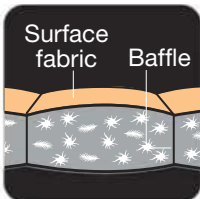
Keep your trail gear nimble



Whether in search of a cold weather camp jacket or a simple, yet reliable belay piece the warmth provided by box construction is a must! Normally used in the production of sleeping bags, this method minimizes heat loss from seam lines. The Frost Line Parka makes an exceptional insulating layer for those that prefer the solitude and challenge of winter activity at altitude.



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Baffle
BOX CONSTRUCTION
eliminates cold spots



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Buon Appetito



These Italian crowd-pleasers are delicious and easy no matter where you're hiking.
By Trail Chef Jennifer Bowen

Rustic Pesto and Bowtie Pasta

This pesto is easy to make in the field, and pasta's carbs will fuel your next day's hike. *2 servings*

- 4 oz. shelf-stable prosciutto or pancetta (easier to tear)
- 8 oz. bowtie pasta
- 1 Tbsp dried basil (less than six months old, ideally) or ¼ cup fresh basil leaves
- ¼ cup Parmesan cheese
- 2 Tbsp pine nuts, chopped
- 2 small cloves garlic, still in their paper-like shell
- 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp salt

AT HOME → Blend dried basil, cheese, and pine nuts in a baggie.

IN CAMP → Heat prosciutto over medium-high heat until crisp; set aside. Cook pasta in a large pot of salted boiling water until it's al dente. Peel garlic and smash with a fork until pulverized. If using fresh basil, chop or tear it into small pieces. Drain pasta. Add olive oil and garlic, toss well. Add basil and cheese mix and toss until incorporated; top with pieces of prosciutto.

Eggplant Parmesan

This hearty meatless dish is perfect for impressing your friends or your new romantic hiking partner. Serve it with a baguette or on top of rice or pasta. *2 servings*

- 1 small Japanese eggplant (about ⅓ lb.)
- ⅓ cup panko breadcrumbs
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ tsp Italian seasoning
- ½ tsp granulated garlic
- 8 oz. can tomato sauce or 3 Tbsp tomato powder
- 4 oz. shredded mozzarella
- 2 tsp Parmesan cheese
- ¼ cup high-heat oil for frying (like peanut or avocado)

AT HOME → Wrap the eggplant in a paper towel, then in a small paper lunch sack. Combine Italian seasoning and garlic and pack in a small container. Pack everything else separately.

IN CAMP → Slice eggplant in ¾-inch-thick rounds and drizzle with a third of the oil. Sprinkle each round with salt, then press the panko into the eggplant (you can be pretty aggressive) on both sides. The panko will not fully adhere but that's OK. In a skillet, heat the remaining oil over medium heat until a small test piece of eggplant dropped in sizzles. Using a fork, add eggplant slices to hot oil. Lower heat to medium-low and cook on one side until golden brown, about 3 to 4 minutes, then turn and cook for about 3 more minutes. Transfer to a plate. Using the same pan, heat tomato sauce with garlic and Italian seasoning until it bubbles. Add eggplant to the sauce without fully submerging it and cover. Cook over low heat for 6 to 8 minutes, gently scraping under the eggplant so the sauce doesn't burn. When the eggplant is soft enough to cut with a fork, remove the pan from the stove. Top with cheeses, cover, and let rest for 3 to 4 more minutes until cheese is melted.



RECIPES TO GO

Download dozens of awesome recipes to your Nook, Kindle, iPad, or smartphone via our e-books: backpacker.com/ebooks.



Fettuccine Alfredo

This version of alfredo sauce is actually closer to the authentic Italian style than the cream-based versions you're used to. *2 servings*

8 oz.	fettuccine noodles, broken in half
1/3	cup Parmesan cheese
1/2	stick unsalted butter
2	Tbsp dry white wine (bonus: happy hour)
1/4	tsp black pepper
1	tsp salt

IN CAMP → Fill a large pot with water, add pasta, bring to a boil, and add salt. Reduce heat to just above simmering. Cook noodles, stirring occasionally, until al dente. Drain most of the water, leaving about 1/4 cup of the liquid. Return pasta to stove over a medium-low flame. Add wine and butter. The liquid will begin to boil very quickly. As soon as it does, add the cheese, stirring continuously with a fork until a thick, smooth sauce forms. Sprinkle with black pepper and serve immediately.

Deconstructed Lasagna

This simplified classic is a high-calorie, gooey, dream come true. *2 servings*

8 oz.	lasagna noodles, broken into 1-inch pieces
1	tsp salt
1/3	cup shelf-stable salami, diced
1/2	tsp dried oregano
1/2	tsp dried basil
1/4	tsp red chili flakes
4.5 oz.	tube sundried tomato paste
1/2	cup grape tomatoes
3 oz.	provolone cheese

AT HOME → Combine basil, oregano and red chili in a small container. Pack tomatoes in a small brown paper bag.

IN CAMP → Using the same pot you'll cook your pasta in, fry salami over medium heat until crisp. Transfer the salami and any fat to a bowl. Fill pot with water, add pasta, bring to a boil, and add salt. Cook just above a simmer, stirring occasionally, until al dente. Meanwhile, halve the tomatoes and slice cheese into 1/2-inch chunks. Drain all but about a 1/2 inch of

water from pot. Return pot to a low flame, add half the tomato paste and all the spice mixture. Stir continuously. As sauce thickens, slowly add remaining tomato paste. When it's no longer soupy, add the salami (with the liquid fat) and the cheese. Stir to incorporate, adding the fresh tomatoes last.



MASTER BACKCOUNTRY PASTA

Bring the biggest pot you're willing to carry. Pasta cooks best and is less likely to stick in plenty of water. In mild conditions, save fuel by turning off the stove once the pasta and water hit a boil, and let sit for the cooking time. Drain using a lid partially cracked over one edge of the pot with a fork over the opening. For max LNT points, drink your pasta water (it's a starchy, hydrating treat). Or, ignore all that and use Barilla Pronto noodles, which are designed to cook in minimal water and not need draining (\$2 per 12 oz. box; barilla.com).



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Star Trails

Use long exposures to reveal the beauty of celestial motion.

By Genny Fullerton

MANAGE THE MOON

Avoid including the moon in your shot, as it will look like a huge bright smudge. Plan your trip to coincide with the new moon, shoot while the moon's below the horizon, or frame so moonlight only illuminates the terrain (as above). Also key: clear skies, and no wind if you plan to include leaves.

COMPOSE

Use a tripod. For concentric rings, locate and include the North Star, which the rest of the stars appear to rotate around. Add other elements that look best with long shutter speeds, such as a waterfall or lit tent (see how at backpacker.com/photoschool).

PREPARE YOUR SETTINGS

Manually focus to infinity; everything more than about 15 feet away will still be sharp. Set the aperture all the way open and the ISO between 100 and 400, to decrease image noise (grainy spots). Expose with a shutter speed between about 30 seconds and 20 minutes.

CAPTURE THE STARS MOVING

Shoot on interval mode with less than 2 seconds between each exposure. Capture at least 45 minutes of total exposure time. For shutter speeds longer than 30 seconds, most cameras will need an external intervalometer (from \$25; pick one that fits your camera).

COMBINE SHOTS

Download your captures, process them all identically, then group into one folder. Use StarStaX software (free; Windows/Mac; bit.ly/StarStaX) to layer the images in the folder. For each pixel, the program will show the brightest one you captured in any shot, thus creating the effect of star trails.

old school

TRY SINGLE EXPOSURE You can create star trails the old-fashioned way, in a single frame, by leaving the shutter open for one very long shot. This method uses more battery and leads to much more noise in the file. It's also riskier; a single errant light flash can ruin your image. But it makes sense for film, uses less memory, and (with digital) you get the pleasure of seeing your image in the field. Preview your composition by cranking the ISO all the way up and perfecting the look you want. Then reduce your ISO back below 400, doubling your shutter speed each time you reduce ISO one stop. The longer you expose, the longer each star's path will appear (plan for a minimum of 30 minutes).

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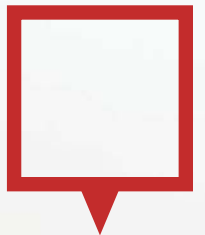


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Survival

out alive:
paralyzed

The second I landed in the snowbank, I knew something was wrong. My head was submerged in the snow, my body straight up in the air, like a light post driven into concrete. I couldn't move my arms or legs.



Cameron Zick, 26, was injured during a summit attempt of Colorado's Mt. Sneffels on May 23, 2015.

*As told to
Emelie Frojen*



WE LEFT FOR THE SUMMIT OF MT. SNEFFELS, A COLORADO FOURTEENER, AT 9 A.M., STARTING OUR SPRING CLIMB EARLY TO AVOID AN EVENING SNOWSTORM IN THE FORECAST. THERE WERE SIX OF US, ALL FRIENDS FROM COLLEGE, ON A REUNION FOUR YEARS AFTER GRADUATION. WE STARTED UP THE TRAIL AMID SPRING FLOWERS AND VIBRANT GREEN TREES, BUT SOON THEY GAVE WAY TO WAIST-DEEP SNOW ETCHED WITH LITTLE RIVULETS OF SNOWMELT.

Two miles of deep, crusty snow delivered us to a talus field. Half of the group, myself included, came underdressed for snow, and so, less than halfway to the summit, we all decided to side with safety and descend. No matter. We'd come out here for fun and camaraderie.

On the hike back down, we passed a 5-foot-tall boulder with a great view of Sneffels and the Uncompahgre National Forest. We all scrambled to the top and set up the camera tripod—if we couldn't make the summit, we at least would get our hero shot.

As we downclimbed, Michael jumped off the rock into a pile of fluffy snow, landing on his side. It looked like fun. This whole hike I'd erred on the conservative side, since I was dressed in shorts, but now felt like the right time to soak up the snow. I figured I'd warm up on the hike down.

I planned out my moves and scrambled down to a spot on the rock that looked like it had a good angle to dismount from the boulder. But as I maneuvered, my foot slipped on a bit of ice and sent me falling head-first.

The second I landed in the snowbank, I knew something was wrong. My head was submerged in the snow, my body straight up in the air, like a light post driven into concrete. I couldn't move my arms or legs.

I screamed for help, but when I opened my mouth I swallowed snow, suffocating me. For a moment, I stopped to listen for help coming, but all I heard was laughter from my friends.

What if no one comes to help? The idea sucked at my energy and my air. But then I reminded myself, *I'm 25 years old, there's no way my life is ending in a 3-foot pile of snow.* I gathered a breath and stopped struggling, hoping my friends would realize I was in trouble. The laughter stopped.

I felt my head move out of the snow and into the light as Michael lifted me by my ankles. I immediately told my friends that I'd lost all movement below the neck and to be very careful. From my awkward upside-down angle, I looked around at the group, all of whom stood in stunned silence.

Immediately, two of my friends, Drew and Ben, took off down the mountain in search of help. Michael, Sean, and Spencer stayed with me. Michael slowly lowered me down flat onto the snow that just moments before had trapped me. He then lay behind me and rested my

back and neck on his stomach, figuring it was the most flat and comfortable way to hold my spine in alignment.

As the evening progressed, the forecasted storm rolled in with flying snow and falling temperatures. Snow accumulated on my limp body but I felt no sensation from anywhere but my face. Michael, still lying on the snow cradling me, started to get very cold.

By this time, I was later told, Drew and Ben had reached the bottom of the trail. They ran into a stranger who gave them her phone, and they called for help.

Back on the mountain, Sean and Spencer spotted a lone pine in a talus field that seemed large enough to shelter us from the snow. Michael and Spencer were always the prepared ones on our outings. On this dayhike, they'd brought survival tools and overnight camping supplies. We began brainstorming how to get me under the tree. The planning kept my mind off my injury.

Spencer pulled an inflatable sleeping pad from his pack and blew it up. The group delicately stabilized my neck, rolled me onto my side, and slid the pad under me. Then, they finally got cell reception and called our friend Josh, a neurosurgeon. By luck and fate, he picked up and instructed my friends on how to move and care for someone with a neck injury.

While they were talking on the phone to Josh, I began to panic. I felt claustrophobic in my own body. Snow accumulated on my face and I couldn't move my arm to dust it off. My torso felt weightless, as if detached from my body. I calmed myself by closing my eyes and drifting into silence. By shutting my eyes, my mind could disconnect from the terrifying sight of my paralyzed body.

My friends returned and told me their plan to move me. Evenly and slowly, they lifted the sleeping pad with me on it off of the ground and walked toward the tree. There, Spencer covered me in a space blanket and my friends took shifts keeping me warm. Each person removed his extra layers and put them on me, while two friends curled up next to me to share body heat. Then they'd switch.

Under the tree, all we could do was wait for the rescue team and my thoughts began to get dark and heavy. Panic and resignation came by turns: *Am I paralyzed for life? Is a rescue team coming? Will I die on this mountain?* When the weight of these questions overwhelmed my silence, I shouted them and obscenities into the night. I screamed because it was one of the few things my body could do.

My friends took turns calming me down. I tried to focus my mind on recovery and the things I should look forward to once I could move again, but the calm was short lived. I stared at my arms and legs, begging them to move, but nothing would. This sequence continued for five hours—until the rescue team arrived.

But there would be no immediate salvation: The rescue crew said that a helicopter couldn't land on the mountain because of the storm. I'd have to be carried.

A team of 10 packaged me up in an insulated body bag for the five-hour trek down the mountain. The inflated body bag pressed against my entire body, and except for a hole around my face, I was locked in.



Some assembly required: Surgeons removed Zick's shattered C6 vertebrae and stabilized his spinal cord with a cage and screws.



Alone with my thoughts, I found the stop-and-go hike down to be a psychological roller coaster. *How painful would it be if I were dropped down the side of the mountain? What if we get lost or my body gives out before the hospital? Even if I make it to surgery, what is there to live for if I'm paralyzed?* I spent the majority of my time fighting this last question and wishing I was at the hospital.

As best I could, I forced my mind to think of people, places, and experiences that I wanted to see and re-live again. I pictured myself on an open field, playing baseball with my 5-year-old sister. The thought of spending just one more minute with her and many of my friends and family gave me motivation to persevere.

At 1 a.m., we reached the trailhead and waiting ambulance. It was a 2.5-hour drive to St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction, Colorado. But before I knew it, I was in an operating room, drifting into an anaesthetic daze in advance of a 12-hour surgery. I shut my eyes, and for the first time since the accident, my mind was quiet.

I woke up in a hospital bed. Here, finally, I felt in control, able to influence the pace of my recovery. I thought back to the mountain, to the point where I almost gave up, and was glad I didn't.

I exerted every inch of effort in my body and lifted my left index finger half an inch off the bed. There was a lot of work ahead.

But hour by hour and day by day, I found the strength, seizing control back from my accident and channeling it into physical therapy.

Now, six months after the fall, I'm back on my feet. It might take months or years, but I told my friends we'll all be standing together on Mt. Sneffels again soon. And we will.

key
skills

STABILIZE A SPINAL INJURY

1. Immobilize the neck.

Hold the victim's head in your hands and keep it from twisting. To create a temporary neck brace, take a jacket, lie it flat on the ground, and zip it up. Roll the midsection from the bottom up, leaving the arms out wide. Slide the rolled-up jacket under the patient's injured neck and tie the arms together around the neck.

2. Support the spine.

Move the spine as little as possible and ensure it stays in a flat, even line. To move the injured person into such a position, enlist help. One person should support the neck at all time. The others should carefully roll the injured person, keeping the neck inline with

the torso, onto his side. Slide a flat surface (such as a sleeping pad) underneath.

3. Move a victim.

Transport increases the risk of twisting the spinal cord (potentially causing permanent damage or death), so only move if the elements pose a serious and immediate safety risk. Never attempt to move a person with a spine injury by yourself—the more hands the safer. Slide your arms underneath the injured person or the sleeping pad, and intertwine your arms, cat's cradle style, underneath his or her spine. Everyone should lift and move at an even pace. Go slow and communicate continuously.



PHOTO / DAN PATITUCCI

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survival

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Ice

You don't have to look hard in winter to find ice. Put this common material to work in a survival situation with these six techniques.

By Joe Flowers

MAKE FIRE

Use a rock to harvest a clear piece of ice—lake ice at least a few feet from the shore is a good bet. Use the heat from your bare hands to shape it into an inch-thick lens that's convex (bulging out) on both sides. Then, holding your ice lens with gloved hands, concentrate the sun like a magnifying glass. (Note: If you think you may someday use this—or just want to impress your friends—practice like crazy. Everything about this technique is hard.)

SIGNAL FOR HELP

Ice can make a decent reflector if properly shaped into a convex geometry that concentrates light. Shape clear ice (as above) and practice shining your lens on a nearby surface to get a sense for how it works. Use this to signal aircraft. Need dispersed light instead? Put your headlamp against a chunk of cloudy ice.

FIX BROKEN GEAR

In subzero conditions, Canadian survival instructors have long used ice as a makeshift glue by wetting moss, lichens, or cloth, wrapping the patch of vegetation or cloth around objects such as broken tent poles, and waiting for the bandage to freeze into place.

ADD STICKING POWER

Make your tent stakes or deadman anchors stronger in snow by dumping a cup or two of water (sourced from a creek or bottle) on them and letting it freeze.

TREAT INJURIES

Ice reduces swelling and pain and can even help slow blood flow from an injury. Apply ice in 20-minute increments and check the wound to ensure it's not getting waxy or white with cold. Keep pressure on bleeders until the flow stops.

BONUS!

STAY AWAKE

If there's a situation where you *must* stay awake, such as after suffering a concussion, tie a piece of ice to the top of your tent so it drips on your forehead. They don't call it water torture for nothing.

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Deep Freeze

Fingers and toes a little blue? Fight the frost without losing digits.

How long can my fingers be numb before I do permanent damage? And what's the best way to warm them up?

-Irving Jilder, via email

→ If your fingers are numb, the clock's already ticking on tissue damage, but nobody knows how fast. Frankly, it depends on too many factors (ambient temp, wind, moisture, etc.). Loss of sensation, ruddy skin, or a prickling feeling mean you've got a touch of reversible frostnip. But just because it's reversible doesn't mean it's not urgent. If you wait until your skin looks white, waxy, or mottled, then you've waited too long. Frostbite is setting in along with the risk of losing those fingers or toes when the tissue goes necrotic.

At the first tinge of numbness, tuck your affected parts into your body's warmest places, like your armpits or groin, where warm, arterial blood flows close to the surface of your skin. (If it's your feet, ask a friend.) Better yet, dip them in warm water.

Warm, not hot. You may have ice crystals in your muscle tissue and sudden heat—or rubbing or brisk toweling—can tear the damaged tissue.

Remember, your fingers are coming back from the dead and they're damn delicate. Be gentle and go slow.

In winter, do the priorities of survival change?

-Mike Berry, via email

→ If you're caught in a bad way in the warmer months, the priorities of survival are typically (in order of importance): shelter, warmth, water, and food. Though you certainly need more calories to keep your body fueled in winter, your priorities don't change—the amount of heat you generate from digestion isn't enough to combat a hostile, cold environment. So shut out your hunger and dig a snow cave or craft a bush shelter. Getting out of the



weather is critical since wind blows away body heat like no one's business. If you can make a fire, by all means do that next, and use it to melt snow for water. Don't munch snow—it'll lower your body temp, and in a winter survival situation, you have to fight for every single degree.

Got a question for Den Mother? Email it to denmother@backpacker.com.

PHOTO BY BRIAN THRELKELD

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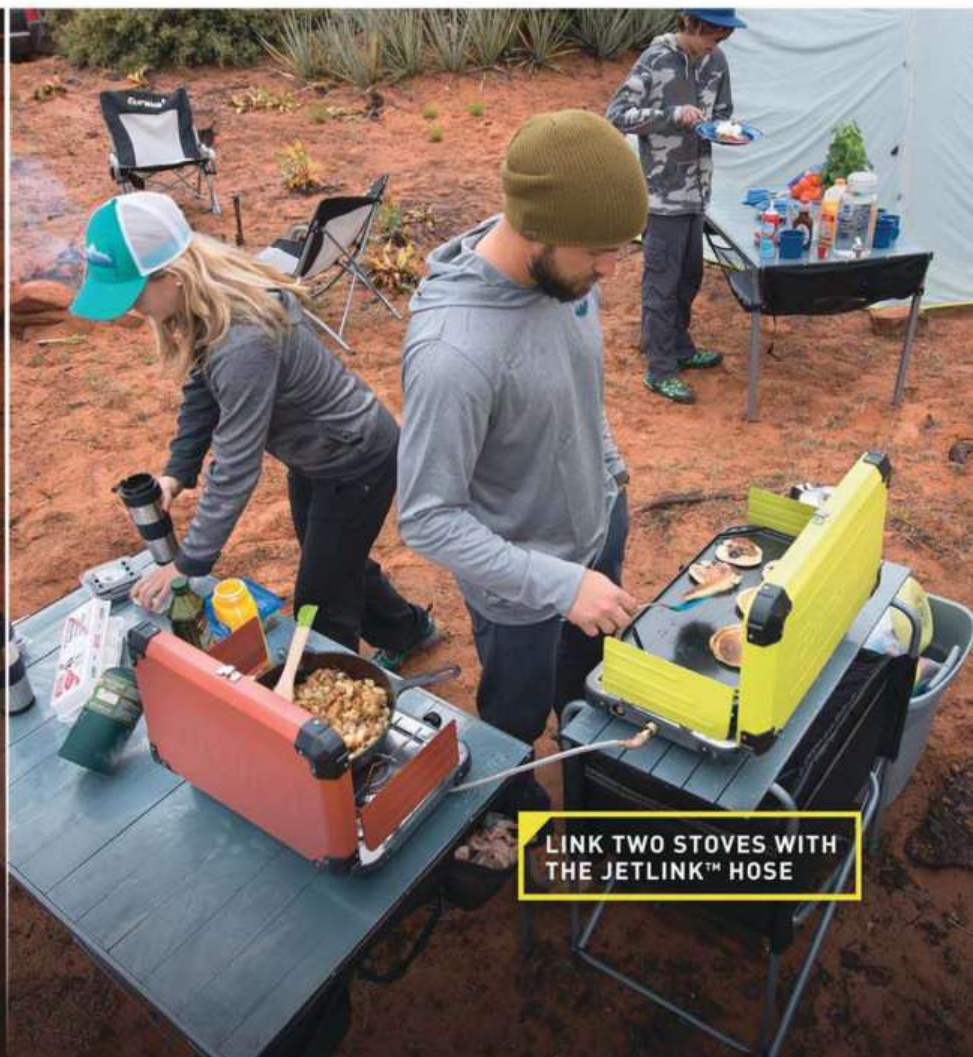
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To learn more, visit subaru.com/environment.



WINTER GUIDE

Enjoy the season's bounty: solitude, fun in the snow, and fleeting frozen scenery. We've gathered 165 trips, skills, and products to make this winter your best ever—whether you're cold-shy or a four-season pro.

44 National Parks

Explore America's iconic preserves when the summer crowds are long gone.

57 Skills

Upgrade your cold-weather fun with tips for snowshoeing and cross-country and backcountry skiing.

65 Editors' Choice Snow Awards

From a bargain ski pack to the year's most versatile shell, these 11 products put the win in winter.

74 Gear Guide

Get equipped with the season's warmest, lightest, and toughest gear in every category.

Hardshells
Softshells
Midlayers
Baselayers
Pants
Packs
Boots
Camp gear

Skis
Ski Boots
Snowshoes
Splitboarding gear
Snow safety
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THE QUIET SEASON

Explore these top national park destinations when no one else does.

By Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan



The afternoon sun pours into Oregon's
Crater Lake from this off-trail vantage
just northwest of Rim Village.
Turn the page to learn how to score
this view for yourself.



WINTER IN THE NATIONAL PARKS



Breathe in. Feel the tingle of cold air in your nostrils. Now breathe out, a billowing cloud of steam sparkling in the sunlight of a landscape so intensely white it makes your eyes hurt. Now, listen. Let your ears fill with the hollow sound of emptiness, snow crunching under your feet, wind whistling through pines. Winter brings a new sensory experience to the parks, and scenery so fleeting you have to know where to find it. Here are our top picks for the best of the fourth season.

64 OF #NPS100

See Fire and Ice

YOSEMITE NP, CA

Winter's plummeting temps and low-angle sunlight bring a little extra pizzazz to Yosemite's iconic waterfalls. To see an ephemeral, flame-red "firefall" pouring from El Capitan's eastern face, head toward Horsetail Fall in the second half of February. When conditions are right—high water, fair skies, and a clear sunset—the sun strikes Horsetail just so, lighting it up in glowing shades of red and orange that look just like tumbling lava. For the best views, start at El Capitan Picnic Area and stroll east into the snowy meadow for a good vantage. **Season** Mid- to late February **Info** nps.gov/yose

Keep It Clean

Yosemite is one of three parks attempting to go zero-landfill, thanks to a partnership between Subaru and the National Park Service. How can you help? Minimize waste by planning ahead. Cold weather tip: Pack bulk hot chocolate instead of single-serve packets. Little changes can go a long way. Learn more at subaru.com/environment.

63 OF #NPS100

Ski around Coastal Peaks

ACADIA NP, ME



Perfectly angled sunlight creates a firefall on Horsetail Fall.

Winter turns Acadia's carriage roads into Norman Rockwell paintings, all white evergreens, quiet frozen ponds, and stone bridges dusted with snow. Tackle the intermediate, mostly groomed 13-mile Around the Mountain Loop, which circles Parkman, Sargent, and Penobscot Peaks, for vistas of frosted mountains. At Brown Mountain Gatehouse, click into cross-country skis that can handle off-track travel (see page 60) and kick off east to the Amphitheater Loop, north past Jordan Pond, then climb through 3.5 miles of ungroomed snow on the Upper Loop for views that extend to Katahdin. Ski over the stone Waterfall Bridges on the Upper Hadlock Pond Trail to close the loop. **Season** January to March **Info** nps.gov/acad; friendsofacadia.org

THE FIRST 100 YEARS

Winter has its own set of milestones in the park system. Here are a few of the best from our world:

1872 Pioneers of the first national park winter propel themselves into Yellowstone on 12-foot wooden skis to hunt.

1928 Jules Fritsch opens what is believed to be California's first ski school at Yosemite.

1971-2 The Paradise area in Mt. Rainier NP receives 1,122 inches (about 93 feet!) of snow, at the time a world record.

1988 Apparently immune to fear, loneliness, and cold, Vern Tejas is the first to survive a solo winter ascent of Denali.

1995 Yellowstone reintroduces the original masters of winter, wolves, in January.

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) JOE AZURE / TANDEMSTOCK.COM; BERGREEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Circle the Country's Deepest Lake

CRATER LAKE NP, OR

This pool cradled in the leftover bowl of an ancient volcano is at its still, sparkling best in the off-season, when snow frames the crater rim. That's when the road circling Crater Lake, a stop-and-snap series of drive-by viewpoints in summer, transforms into one of the park system's finest multiday ski or snowshoe tours (day trips also possible). The three- to four-day, 31-mile circuit treats experienced winter travelers to challenging climbs, hulking snowdrifts (the park averages 520 inches of snow yearly), lakeview campsites under snowy evergreens, and a peek at the 1,943-foot-deep lake from every angle. From Rim Village, follow the ungroomed West Rim Drive clockwise around the crater, dipping in toward the crater rim when conditions allow. Camp in the trees (away from the road and out of the wind) and bring extra food (in case common winter storms strand you) and avalanche skills. **Season** December to May (go in March and April for the best weather and longer daylight hours) **Permit** Free; pick up at the visitor center or ranger station **Info** nps.gov/crla

61 OF #NPS100

Bunk in Skiers' Heaven

SEQUOIA NP, CA

Your idea of a perfect weekend: ripping down the snowy slopes of 11,000-foot Sierra peaks by day, then kicking back at a cozy, timber-and-stone hut by night. Your backcountry heaven: Pear Lake Winter Hut. This 10-person shelter in a snowy bowl at 9,200 feet—more intimate and surrounded by more skiable terrain than neighboring Yosemite's better-known Ostrander Ski Hut—requires a strenuous, 6-mile ski or snowshoe trip to reach, making it best for intermediate to advanced winter travelers with avy know-how. Once you've called your bunk, earn your turns on challenging ski runs with views over barbed Sierra summits or snowshoe through quiet conifer forests and up steep ridgelines—or don't. Somebody's gotta keep the pellet stove fed and make the hot toddies. **Season** December to April **Lodging** \$40/person per night; apply for a spot through the lottery which is being drawn on November 2 this year. **Info** sequoiahistory.org/pearlake



NPS100

All year we're counting down the things that make the NPS special. See our progress so far at backpacker.com/nps100.

The Pear Lake Winter Hut offers the perfect base-camp for skiing Sequoia. Check out more of the country's finest backcountry ski huts at backpacker.com/huts.



60 OF #NPS100

Snowshoe in the Moonlight

BRYCE CANYON NP, UT

Winter's long nights mean more time to tromp around this maze of desert hoodoos in the moonlight. Bryce Canyon's very dark nights and very clean air can make the full moon spotlight-bright—and when it reflects off a fresh cloak of snow, you may as well leave the headlamp in your pack as you descend to the inner canyon. Rangers run a popular full moon snowshoe hike each month when snow is deep enough (at least 8 inches), but you can explore the canyon's snowball-capped towers on your own. The steep, 1.5-mile route from Fairyland Loop trailhead to the Chinese Wall drops to views of knobby hoodoos forming a skinny cliff; up top, snowshoe .5 mile to 8,176-foot Paria Point for a look at the canyon's spires in starlight (check snow conditions first).

Season November to March **Reservations** Required (and free) for guided Full Moon Snowshoe Hikes; call the visitor center at (435) 834-4747 up to two days ahead for a spot.

Info nps.gov/brca

59 OF #NPS100

Tour an Icy Cave

LAVA BEDS NM, CA

Deep under the craggy volcanic landscape, ice takes on weird and wonderful forms: spiky sheets of icicles, miniature frozen spires, glazed rock faces, and a hoarfrost-sprinkled ceiling that sparkles like the night sky. Every Saturday from January to March, six lucky visitors can see it firsthand on a three-hour guided tour of Crystal Ice Cave, where they'll scoot down a frozen slide, wiggle through tight passages, and squeeze behind an ice waterfall. For your best shot at a spot, call right at 8:30 a.m. three weeks before your desired date.

And don't delay—climate change is melting surface ice, which seeps into lower caverns and refreezes, sealing off more and more of the cave every year. **Season** January to March **Permit** Free; reservations required. Call (530) 667-8113. **Info** nps.gov/labe

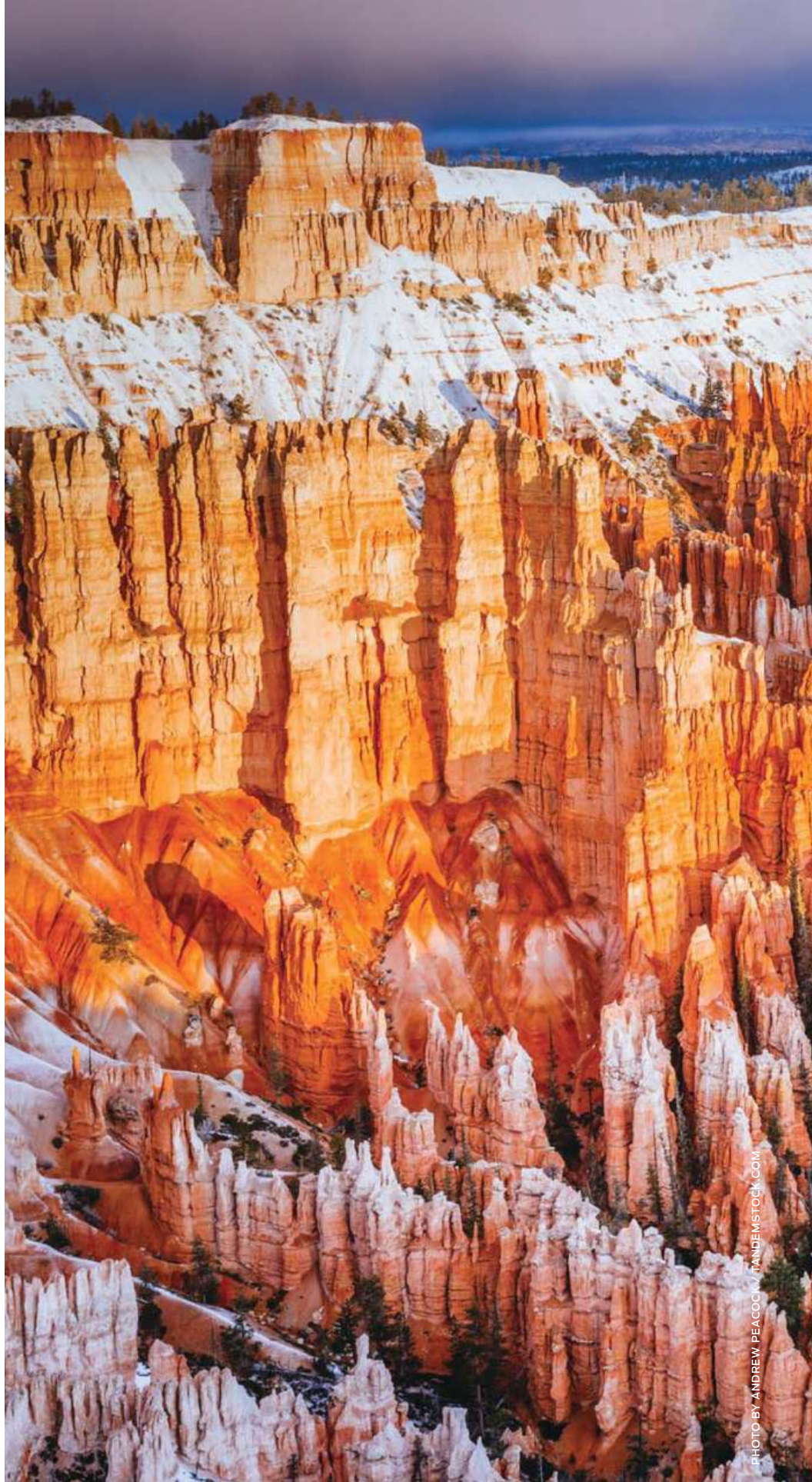


PHOTO BY ANDREW PEACOCK/TANDEMSTOCK.COM

Busy in every other season, Bryce
Amphitheater is quiet in winter.

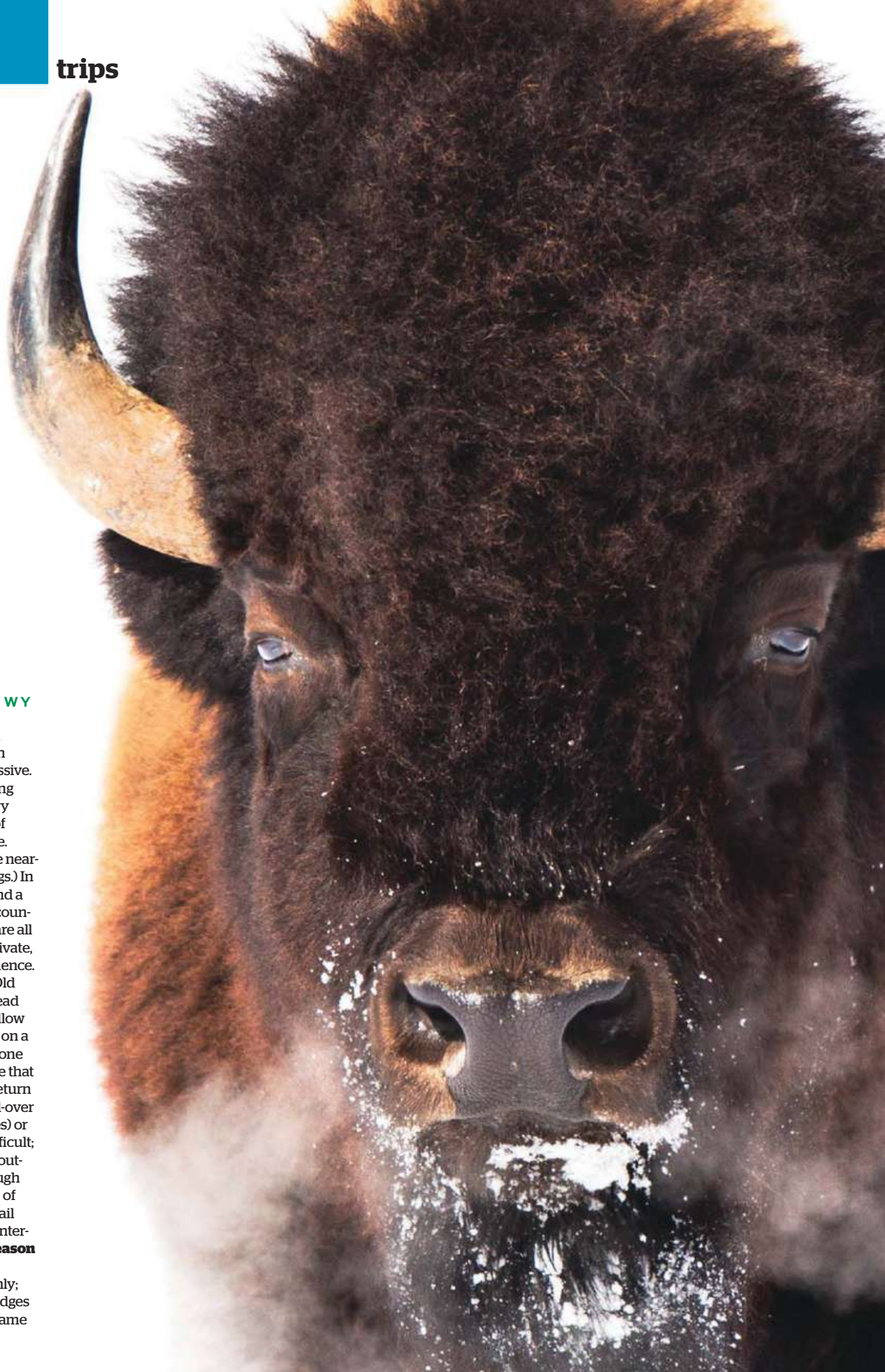


58 OF #NPS100

Tour the Geysers

YELLOWSTONE NP, WY

Summertime geysers, even glimpsed while jostling with high-season crowds: impressive. Wintertime geysers, bubbling and bursting over the snowy landscape to an audience of precisely you: unforgettable. (And that's not counting the near-guaranteed wildlife sightings.) In winter, a snowcoach ride and a few miles of mellow cross-country skiing or snowshoeing are all that separate you from a private, multigeysers viewing experience. Hop a ski shuttle from the Old Faithful Lodge to the trailhead at Kepler Cascades, then follow the Firehole River 2.5 miles on a groomed, wooded trail to Lone Star Geyser, a 40-foot plume that blows every three hours. Return to the lodge via the snowed-over park road (easy; 7 total miles) or the Howard Eaton Trail (difficult; 6 total miles). For a shorter outing, wind 5 easy miles through the hot springs and geysers of Biscuit Basin (pick up the trail across from the lodge), a wintering site for elk and bison. **Season** December to February **Ski shuttle** \$21/day; drop-off only; yellowstonenationalparklodges.com **Lodging** From \$104; same website **Info** nps.gov/yell



See
Yellowstone's
resident bison
on a winter
tour of the
park.



**BEST
JOB
EVER**



THE FIRST 13,000 MILES

We partnered with Subaru to send a pair of travelers on a yearlong grand tour celebrating the national parks centennial. Their task: explore ways to see, protect, and understand the essence of America's great park system. Three months, 17 states, and 11 parks later, Madison Perrins and Aidan Lynn-Klimenko's journey has barely begun. Here's what they've found so far.

Grand Teton
National Park



The greatest part of the tour has been the strange sense of being an explorer in the country we've always lived in...



...from the places we never knew existed, like Voyageurs in Minnesota (where Aidan is from)...



...to the places, like Wind Cave, that we simply couldn't imagine.



This sense of wonderment brims from each park. Sometimes it's enough to stop a toddler in her tracks, as here in the Badlands.



The simplicity of this life grows on us with every one-pot meal we eat (in this case at Diablo Lake in North Cascades).

We're making memories by the mile, campsite, park, and photograph. Come with us. Check backpacker.com/nps100 for our updates and Instameets, or follow us on Instagram @backpackermag.



It's like there's a full, new world on the other side of every highway, park border, or tent door, like we found in Wrangell-St. Elias.



57 OF #NPS100

Ski the Backcountry

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NP, CO

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Hidden Valley ski area was among the most famous places in the world to hit the slopes. But in 1991, the National Park Service finished dismantling the mini-resort, letting the area revert back, mostly, to what it was prior to 1950. And what it was continues to draw skiers today. Follow the old skin track (from the parking area off Trail Ridge Road) as it climbs 2,000 feet to above-treeline views and windswept slopes. Down mountain, old ski trails offer wide-open tree skiing that feels like having a resort to your lonesome. Better yet: Slopes angled 30 degrees or less dominate the area, leading to a lower (but not zero) avy risk. **Season** December to May **Info** nps.gov/romo

THE BIG AGNES SLEEP SYSTEM

NEVER ROLL OFF YOUR PAD AGAIN



Breakfast above the Colorado River, Western CO - Braden Gurnem

- Our original sleep system design has been providing comfort in the backcountry since 2001
- Slide your pad into an integrated sleeve on the bottom of the bag for insulation
- The top two-thirds of the bag is insulated in the traditional style to keep you warm

Outfitting Dirtbags Everywhere...

Tents • Sleeping Bags
Pads • Apparel



Lost Ranger 15°F, 2lb 15oz

+



Q-Core SL™ 15°F, 17oz

=



Big Agnes System Bag

55 OF #NPS100

Stormwatch on the Coast

OLYMPIC NP, WA

Instead of hiding from winter rains, hardy souls celebrate the Northwest's dreary season with stormwatching trips to the sleety Pacific, where ferocious, 20-foot rollers regularly pound the evergreen-fringed beach. For a front-row seat, head to Shi Shi Beach on the park's northern tip: The sand is wide enough here to put a safe distance between your tent and the waves, and you won't need to cross any swollen creeks. From the Makah Shi Shi trailhead, stroll 2 miles through the rainforest, then scout for a sheltered site along the next 2.3 miles of beach. Note: Consult the tide table pretrip and avoid the highest high tides (above about 8 feet), which can produce dangerously big waves, and check current storm conditions with rangers. **Season** November to March **Permit** Two required. Pick up a park permit (\$5/person per night) at one of three visitor centers and a Makah Recreation Pass (\$10) in Neah Bay. **Info** nps.gov/olym

56 OF #NPS100

Climb Lake Superior Ice

PICTURED ROCKS NL, MI

Each winter, groundwater seeps through the porous sandstone cliffs edging this lakeshore park, decorating the rock with dramatic spires and sheets of ice plunging straight down to Lake Superior. More than 50 named climbing routes spider up 25 miles of shoreline on the park's west side, luring everyone from gawking hikers to rookie ice climbers to seasoned pros. Beginners and intermediates can head to the Sand Point Escarpment (a 1-mile hike from Sand Point Beach) to try their top ropes on formations like The Curtains, a 30-foot, rippling ice wall, and Sweet Mother Moses, a 70-foot frozen pillar. **Season** December to March **Info** nps.gov/piro



See ice falls on the Chapel Loop Trail, .5 mile west of Chapel Rock Beach.

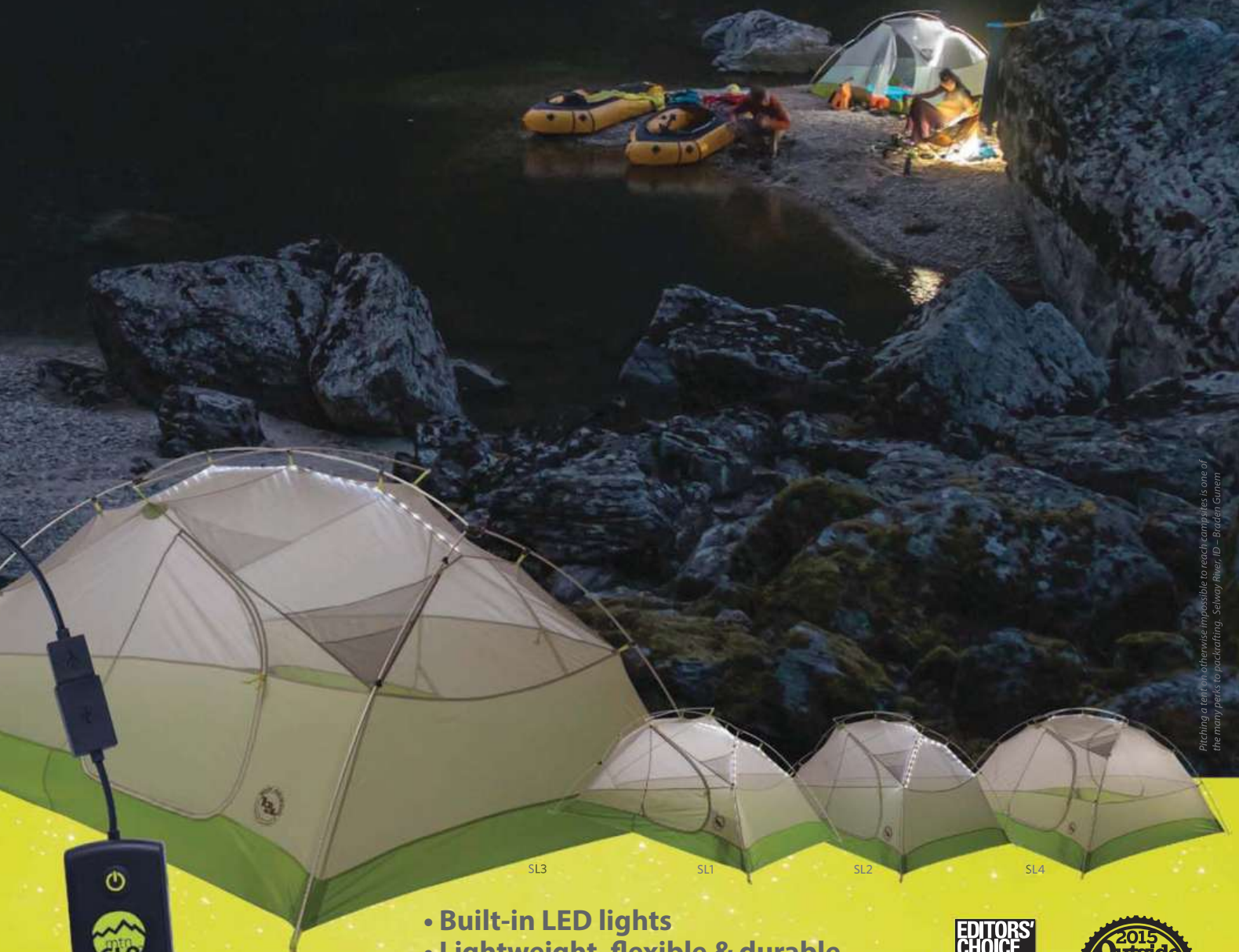
THE NEXT 100 YEARS

Climate change is coming to the park system. By now, everyone with a TV is aware of the most obvious effects (disappearing glaciers and mega forest fires, for starters). But milder winters followed by hotter summers will also coerce iconic wildlife, like elk, to change their seasonal patterns and habitats. How—and whether—to manage the future of those herds and flocks is a challenge managers are grappling with. But at least there's a silver lining. "One of the things we can do now is give those animals time and space to adapt to the changing climate," says Dr. Nicholas Fisichelli, an NPS ecologist. "That's what the parks do."

PHOTO BY VIKTOR POSNOV



Award Winning Rattlesnake SL mtnGLO™ Tent Collection



Pitching a tent in otherwise impossible to reach campsites is one of the many perks to backpacking. Selway River, ID - Braden Gunem

SL3

SL1

SL2

SL4

- Built-in LED lights
- Lightweight, flexible & durable
- Switch-on ambient light
- Superlight backpacking 1,2,3 & 4 person tent options



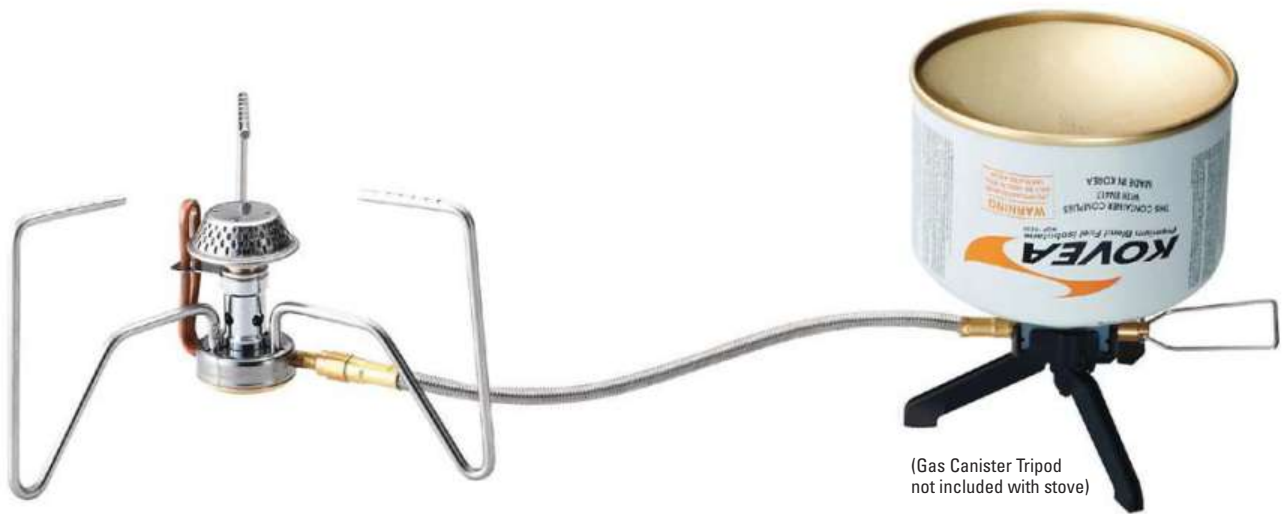
USB compatible controller with on, off and 50% brightness settings



mtnGLO™ Collection

Rattlesnake SL3 mtnGLO™

TURN CONVENTION UPSIDE DOWN



(Gas Canister Tripod
not included with stove)

THIS COMPACT STOVE CAN HANDLE THE COLD TURN IT ON

KOVEA
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Spider Stove / 130g
Compact design for efficient cooking even in cold temps.

By **Maren
Horjus**
Illustrations by
Supercorn



WINTER WARRIOR

Hibernation is for bears. Get out more this season with 42 tips on exploring the backcountry on snowshoes and skis.



WE GET IT.

Winter can be intimidating. Once temps drop and the snow arrives, the birds head south, the bears hibernate, and most hikers hang up their boots and stay inside. But you already know that life's real rewards don't come from taking the easy road. And with the right equipment and know-how, seizing the joy of winter doesn't actually have to be that tough. You have three choices for getting out there that share hiking's DNA: snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and backcountry skiing. We've broken each one down for you, from the herringbone step to the kick turn to gear-buying tips. So what are you waiting for? Pick your favorite and head out now—because a season like this comes but once a year.



Snowshoeing

If you can hike, you can snowshoe. Find some snowshoes, either from the nearest rental shop (about \$10/day), Craigslist, or this magazine (see page 106). Head to the trailhead and strap them on. Then start walking. That's it. No learning curve, no fear, no stress. The snow-covered world that moments before seemed forbidding and inaccessible is now your playground. No hill is too steep, no powder is too deep. The only thing to learn the hard way is it's pretty tricky to walk backward. Luckily, thanks to the freedom they offer, there always seems to be something great ahead. —Rachel Zurer

KNOW THYSELF

Snowshoes come in three general categories. Knowing your experience level and what you plan to use them for should help you determine which is best for you.

1

If you're just looking to dayhike on mellow trails (nothing too steep or deep), aim for **recreational** snowshoes. They have easy-to-adjust bindings, minimalist traction (best for flat, simple terrain), and are usually available for rent.

2

If you would be running if there weren't 4 feet of snow outside, then **fitness** snowshoes are for you. They're sleeker and lighter than rec options (for a more natural gait), but that comes at the cost of top-notch flotation: They relegate you to groomed trails and no more than a few inches of powder.

3

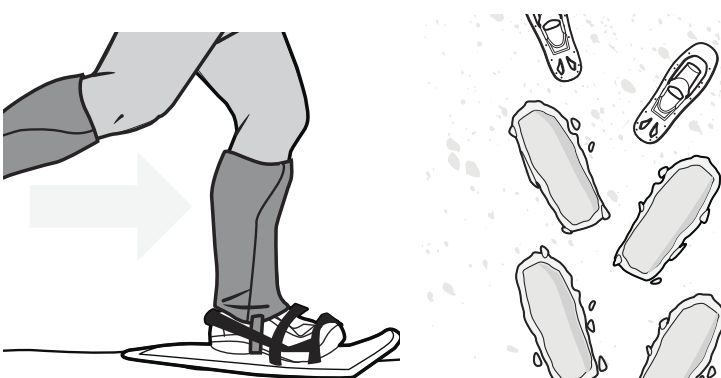
If you're planning more intense backcountry objectives, then you need **backpacking** snowshoes. The largest of the lot, these shoes have the most surface area (for maximum flotation), more aggressive traction, and more sophisticated binding systems.

{PROS KNOW}

THE CASE FOR POSTHOLING

Forget CrossFit. Forget hot yoga, Soulcycle, Soloflex, and your Body Pump class. There is no better short-duration, full-body workout than postholing. With a pack on. In snowshoes. Uphill. ¶For as effective as snowshoes are at keeping you afloat, they just don't stand a chance against fresh, waist-deep powder. At first, you sink in only to your knee and have to sort of jerk your leg back and up at the same time while scooping out an additional 5 pounds of snow. Then, a thought, small and passing, like, "I hope that doesn't happen the whole way," drifts through your consciousness. Then you take another step and lurch forward, sort of upright, sort of on your side, with snow enveloping your leg to your pelvis. You fight back up to your feet, flailing your arms to get balanced and pulling your leg from the blueish mouth. It's about as graceful as dying is in a shark movie. ¶But this is not where the magic happens. The magic is the next step, when your next leg goes down and in, too. Here you, of course, pause and look back, panting, to see your path, which, as precise as a drunkard's staggering, has carried you 10 feet. Another 100 yards of this, you think, and I'll be an animal. —Casey Lyons

WALK THIS WAY



Right foot, left foot. Good, you're learning. OK, OK, there is a bit more to it than that. First, you'll be walking in a wider stance than usual to accommodate the shoes (expect to feel underworked muscles, like your inner thighs and hip flexors, at the end of the day). Try ski or trekking poles for balance. **Ascending** Save energy with the **herringbone step**: Point your toes outward, keeping your heels shoulder-width apart, and weight the inside edges. (If it's really steep, put your weight over the toe crampons.) **Descending** Bend your knees and keep your weight centered. Consider creating switchbacks on steep slopes. **Traversing** Cut shelves with each step, keeping your weight into the mountainside.

A PROPER FACE-PLANT

Right foot forward
+
Left foot forward, clipping right foot
=

A poof of spindrift, and you're in a pile, unsure which snowshoe belongs to which foot. The only way up is to channel Fido: Roll over.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SIZE.

Snowshoes are typically available in three different sizes—but which is for you? Take this quiz to find out.

How much do you weigh?

- (a) <150 lbs.
- (b) 150-175 lbs.
- (c) 175-200 lbs.
- (d) >200 lbs.

What type of snow will you walk in?

- (a) Hard or groomed; wet or dense
- (b) Light or ungroomed; deep or powdery

SCORING A's = 1 point; B's = 2 points; C = 3 points; D = 4 points

2-3 POINTS: 8 BY 25 INCHES

Since you're a small fry, no sense hauling the extra weight and girth if you don't need it.

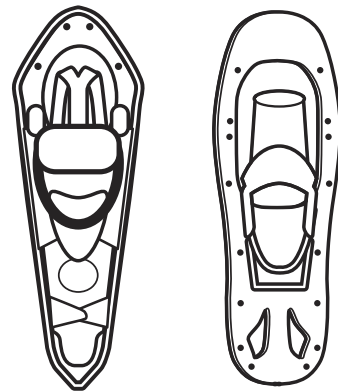
4 POINTS: 9 BY 30 INCHES

You're the Goldilocks of the bunch—you need a little more length, but not a ton.

5-6 POINTS: 10 BY 36 INCHES

For the maximum benefit (flotation), you need the most surface area.

Gear up



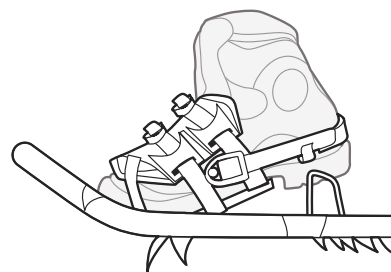
FRAME

Tapered and pintail shapes (left) promote a more natural gait, while ovals improve flotation.



TRACTION

Recreational models usually have a single **crampon** underfoot that bites the snow when you weight it. Backpacking models (pictured) may also sport **teeth** around the frame and extra crampons near the toe and tail.



CLIMBING FEATURES

Look for a model with a **heel lifter**; when you ascend, flip the small bar up and it will support your foot in a more level position, even while the shoe is angled on the slope. If you plan to go on longer missions, look for a **spring-loaded binding** that will push your heel upward after you step, saving your calves.



Cross-country skiing

Alpine skiing is all about the thrill; snowshoeing, well, like hiking, that's about taking it slow. But if you're after the perfect balance between speed and savoring the sights, sounds, and Christmas-tree smells of the winter world, then go straight for the middle way on a pair of cross-country skis. Kick and glide your way through the woods and across mountain slopes, floating through the miles with time to enjoy every snowy view, and you'll know: Not too fast, not too slow, the skinny-ski tour is just right. —*Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan*

{PROS KNOW}

THE RULES

From a cross-country skier to everyone else...

(1) Don't walk in or otherwise ruin the ski track.

(2) See #1.

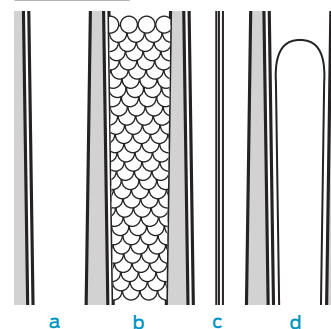


KNOW THYSELF

There are three types of cross-country skiing disciplines.

- 1 Classic skis**—long, narrow, and lightweight—lack edges, making them best for moderate terrain.
- 2 Skate skis** (pictured) are a little stiffer and a little shorter than classics. They're designed for groomed tracks, so avoid these if you plan on breaking any trails.
- 3** Short and equipped with metal edges, **Nordic skis** handle ungroomed and hilly terrain best of all types.

Gear up



BASES

If you want to deal with fine-tuning wax for different objectives and conditions, go **waxable** (a). If not, go **waxless** and choose one of the following traction options for your base. **Fish scales** (b) etched into the base grip snow OK, but aren't effective on ice or steep inclines. In below-freezing temps, **zeros** (c), which have a rubber material underfoot that you manually sand to create grippy "hairs," provide the best traction. Skis with built-in **skins** (d), or small, furry mohair patches underfoot, give the most reliable grip, but are the slowest when gliding.

A PROPER FACE-PLANT

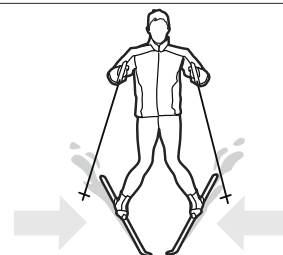
Downhill pitch
+
Lapse of focus
=
Metal edges
=
Tangle of legs.
Find your tips,
align into "french fry,"
and pop up.



GLIDE
THIS
WAY

Think of your arms as pistons: They provide the momentum to keep you coasting between kicks. As the right ski goes forward, reach with your left pole.

In classic skiing, **bend your knees** slightly and kick one foot forward. Pull the other one ahead to meet it. As you transfer your weight to the other ski, you'll glide.



If you need to **brake**, make a pizza with your ski tips, weighting the inside of your skis. You'll have the urge to lean back, but force yourself to stay over your feet for better stability.

Where does Eric
Larsen gotta go?
On expeditions
to the North Pole,
South Pole and
Mt. Everest.
In a record-
setting
year.



Where do we
gotta go? To
work in
Two Harbors,
Minnesota,
building
the gear
that gets
Eric from
the top of
the world,
to the
bottom
and back
again.

GO WHERE YOU
GOTTA GO.



Cross-Trek
Wheeled Duffel



GraniteGear.com



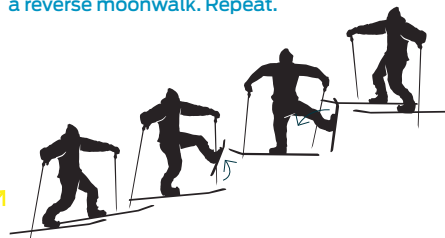
Backcountry Skiing

When you slice across a white tapestry of untouched snow that you reached under your own power, you experience the mountains' grandeur in a new way. They're both starker and prettier, simultaneously more intimidating and more attainable. It may be the best payoff in winter sports, and it's available to anyone who knows how to ski and has some avalanche know-how. The face shots (see right) are yours for the taking. —Maren Horjus

TOUR THIS WAY



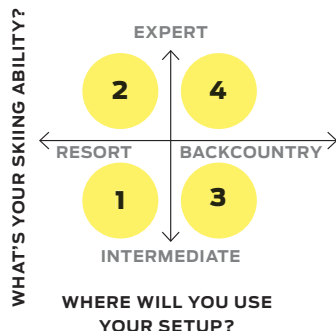
Loosen buckles for comfort (lock the forefoot down if you start to feel any hot spots). Drag one foot forward, keeping the ski on the snow surface (don't lift—skis are heavy) like a reverse moonwalk. Repeat.



Time to beast uphill. You'll learn quickly when a slope is too steep for shooting straight up, but at around 15 degrees you'll need to start creating switchbacks. There are two ways to change direction on an uphill slope: (1) Facing uphill, shuffle around with baby steps (keeping your weight low and into the slope). (2) Balancing on your uphill pole and downhill ski, lift your uphill ski, swiveling it all the way around so you're doing ballet's third position. Shift your balance to your uphill ski and bring the downhill ski around to parallel the other. This is called a **kick turn** and will win you many style points.

KNOW THYSELF

Backcountry skiers are a complex bunch, but we think we've got them pinned.



1 You're a resort skier who wants the capacity to go out-of-bounds if opportunity knocks. You need a super-basic frame binding to mount on your favorite skis (something like the Salomon MTN Explore 95, page 100).

2 Since you ski for the steeps and adrenaline, your backcountry setup will help you slay the sidecountry and a few couloirs. Slap a high-DIN frame binding on some rigid, rockered skis (like the Dynafit Chugach, page 100).

3 The longer the tour, the better. Backcountry skiing is your means for "hiking" this winter: You need a lightweight tech binding to mount on some lightweight sticks (like the Blizzard Zero G 85, page 100).

4 Whether it holds fresh powder or mank, 20-degree slopes or 50-degree chutes, the backcountry is your resort. Your setup needs to be both light and strong, so mount a high-DIN tech binding to a burly pair of rockered skis (like the DPS Wailer, page 102).

THE LOWDOWN ON SKINS

From choosing the right ones to taking care of them, this is what you need to know.

- (1) Pick a material.** There are three types: nylon (best grip), mohair (easiest glide), and mixed. Beginners should stick with nylon.
- (2) Cut to fit.** Trim the skin so it covers the whole ski base (but not the metal edges).
- (3) Put them to use.** After removing skins (at the top of a run), "jog in place" to rub any excess stickiness off your bases. Fold the skins glue-to-glue and, if you're planning on taking multiple laps, stuff them into your shell so your body heat keeps them warm (extreme cold can diminish their stickiness).
- (4) Store well.** When they're totally dry, fold them with a "skin saver" or "cheat sheet" (piece of plastic that came in the box with them) to preserve the glue's stickiness.

{PROS KNOW}

TALK LIKE A SKIER

More than any other winter discipline, skiing has its own lingo. Tear out this page, stow it with your beacon, probe, and shovel, and start spitting salt next time you're bombing, shredding, ripping, smashing, or getting all-around rad with your brahs.

Types of snow:

- **Bony** (adj): when rocks and other landmines poke through the snow (usually in shoulder seasons)
- **Bulletproof** (adj): when freeze-thaw cycles have rendered a slope so hard that ski edges can't slice it
- **Champagne** (n): light, feathery, sparkly snow
- **Corn** (n): granular, wet snow that's pliable and easy to turn in (characteristic of spring or late-season snow)
- **Death cookies** (pl. n): frozen chunks of snow (like avalanche debris) that can throw off your skiing
- **Freshies** (pl. n): new snowfall
- **Mank** (n): wet, grippy snow
- **Pow** (n): the ultimate prize

Everything else:

- **Bail** (v): to hurl yourself majestically to the ground in lieu of actually skiing
- **Bluebird** (adj): when blue skies follow a storm
- **Face shot** (n): the act of beautiful, weightless snow flying up into your face when you turn (cosmic event; rare)
- **First tracks** (pl. n): arcs cut through untouched snow; acquiring them has been known to cause tension among friends
- **Gaper** (n): a (usually new) skier whose ignorance of the mountains and other skiers is noticeable; can be identified by the forehead gap between their helmet and goggles
- **Steazy** (adj): achieved with style and ease
- **Stomp** (v): to cleanly land a jump
- **Tomahawk** (n): a cartwheel-like crash

A PROPER FACEPLANT

Lose your balance. It can happen any number of ways, but, for some reason, it's always called "catching an edge."

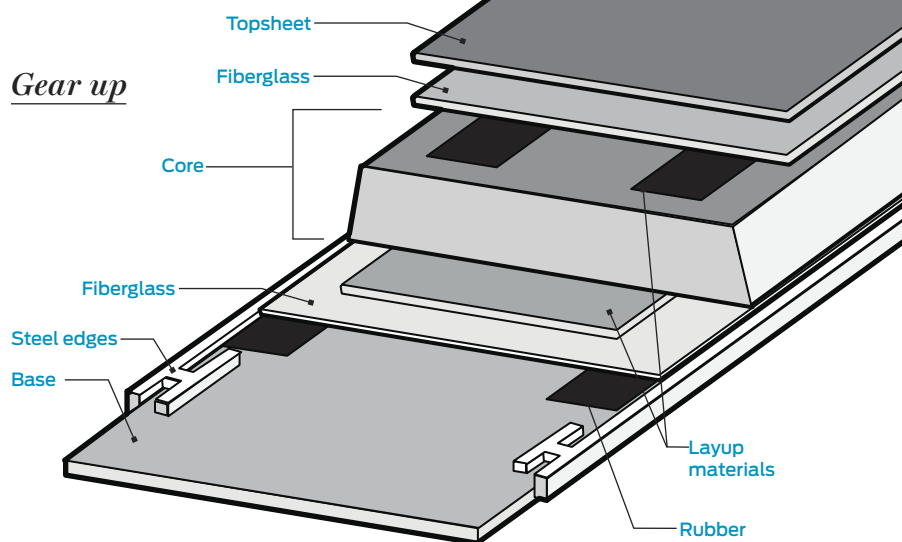
+
Try to scrub speed.

=

Yard sale. The best way to save a skiing fall is to ride out of it. Unfortunately, instincts take over, and, by virtue of trying to brake, you tend to make a bigger mess. Recover: Locate your gear, stomp out a shelf, clear the pow out of your binding, and pretend like nothing happened.

NOT SO FAST! All winter sports require knowledge of avalanches. Take a class (~\$350; bit.do/aiare-courses) and brush up at backpacker.com/avalanches.

Gear up



CONSTRUCTION

The main components that affect the ski's performance are the core and layup. **Core** Your ski is mostly comprised of wood. Heavier woods (like ash and maple) are better at dampening vibrations, but lighter options (like paulownia and balsa) are better for touring and traveling uphill. **Layup** Ski makers insert extra materials into or around the core for different benefits. They may add metal for rigidity (think racing skis) or carbon for lightweight rigidity or Kevlar to dampen vibrations.

Cambered



Reverse cambered

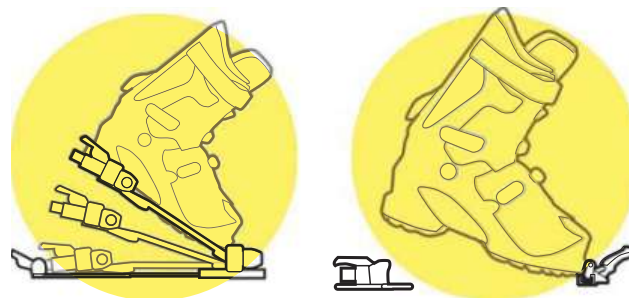


Rockered



PROFILE

The way a ski handles varying snow is largely determined by its profile shape. A **cambered** ski's edge will be fully in contact with the snow surface when weighted, giving you maximum power in a turn—making it best for groomed snow. Its opposite, a **reverse cambered** ski, has the least amount of contact with snow, which makes it easy to pivot, but hard to edge. It's best for powder. For backcountry skiing, you'll probably want something in between: A **rockered** ski is cambered underfoot for powering through turns, but rises in the tip (and sometimes the tail) to get some of the benefits of a reverse cambered ski in mixed and deep snow.



BINDING

A **frame binding** (left) is like an alpine binding, but the foot plate detaches in touring mode. It gives you the security of an alpine binding, but, because it's heavy (and you need to lift the foot plate with every stride when touring), it can feel cumbersome on long backcountry skins (and loud when your heel smacks the framing). The alternative, a **tech binding** (right), locks the boot with two pins in the toe, which makes it lighter (and leaves you with less weight to lift when striding), but can feel less secure when laying into a turn. (Make sure your boot is compatible with your binding.)



WE LIVE FOR
THE SOUNDS OF
SOLITUDE
AS WE SKIN UP THE TRACK



EXPERTISE



OUTDOOR SCHOOL



GEAR

BEFORE YOU HEAD OUT, STOP IN.



[REI.COM/SNOW](https://www.rei.com/snow)



For our final test trip, we went on a five-day spring ski tour in the Colorado Rockies (thank you, 10th Mountain Division hut system).



THE SEASON'S BEST GEAR



The only way to find the best winter gear? Get out and stay out—all season long. That's what our testers did to select the 11 winners on the following pages. From a better helmet to a bargain winter pack to a foolproof firestarter, these products will help you get the most out of winter.



The Ozonic's compression straps let you lash on extras or compress small loads.

Mountain Hardwear Ozonic 65 OutDry

No need for fussy rain covers or liners with this waterproof pack.

This pack protects you from one of the worst backcountry surprises: discovering that all your gear is soaked, making a rainy day even worse. Unlike other waterproof packs we've carried, which are either way heavy or lack a proper suspension system, this one is lightweight, carries like a dream, and negates the hassle of using pack covers or liners or drybags. "I hauled this for three weeks in Alaska, including stormy days with 50-mph winds at 14,000 feet, and not one drop of moisture wormed its way inside," our tester says. Credit goes to the OutDry construction process, which laminates a waterproof membrane to the entire pack interior (it's not submersible, as there's still a drawstring opening at the top). We also loved the Ozonic's suspension and fit. The padded mesh shoulder straps attach to a harness with 3 inches of torso adjustability. The aluminum stays, corrugated plastic backpanel, and the plushly padded hipbelt support loads up to 65 pounds. "I lugged this fully loaded and hooked onto a sled for an expedition on Denali. My legs weren't impressed with the weight, but at least my hips and back were comfortable," our tester says. Nice touch: In the wettest weather, you can unclip the OutDry toplid and flip it upside-down to protect the non-waterproof zippered pocket.

► \$270; 3 lbs. 15 oz. (M/L); S/M, M/L; 65 liters; mountainhardwear.com

Arc'teryx Zeta LT

This 11-ounce jacket sets a new bar for shells: It's light and protective enough to wear 12 months a year.

A lot of shells promise year-round versatility, but there's always a tradeoff: either too streamlined for winter or too hot and heavy for summer. This one's *just* right. The lightweight, three-layer armor proved its mettle on February ski tours, when the brimmed hood shielded our eyes from windblown graupel and the tough fabric shouldered skis without ripping or scuffing. Yet it didn't stifle on June hikes along Colorado's Continental Divide Trail. "Through 7 months of testing and a huge range of weather conditions, this jacket has managed to be exactly what I needed in every situation," says our Colorado-based editor. Its secret is the fabric: a 40-denier nylon with "false twist" yarns that are crimped, making them particularly stretchy and abrasion-resistant. Result: The material is uncommonly tough for the weight, but still thin enough to enhance breathability. It's also soft for a hardshell, thanks to Gore's new C-Knit membrane, which is constructed of supple knit loops instead of the traditional rigid weave. Result? The Zeta feels gauzy over a short-sleeve T-shirt during summertime rainstorms, rather than clammy and heavy, like many winter shells. The fabric prevents wind from penetrating, but because it's not a stiff shield like heavier fabrics, we could feel the effects of big gusts. Features are efficient and functional: One cord-lock behind the head cinches the hood; Velcro tabs seal the cuffs; zippered pockets (there are three) hold an iPhone 6 and inclinometer; a hem cord seals out wind. Packed, it's softball size—so we take it everywhere.

► \$399; 11 oz. (w's M); arcteryx.com



PHOTOS BY (2) ANDREW BYDLON / CAVEMAN COLLECTIVE; COURTESY



The fabric's tight weave repels gusts while gridlines let body heat escape.

Patagonia Dual Aspect Hoodie

It's a fleece, but warmer. It's a softshell, but more breathable. It's one of the most versatile midlayers we've ever tested.

This jacket defies pigeonholing. Made from an exclusive Polartec fabric with a smooth-faced, gridded outer surface, the Dual Aspect performs like a softshell but is way more comfortable for breakfast-to-bedtime wear. It works as a cold-weather midlayer, a breathable shell for highly aerobic winter sports, and a standalone, light insulator in mild temps. We used it over just a baselayer during a tough uphill tour to Colorado's

Skinner Hut. "Temps ranged from about 20 to 35°F and I was carrying a 50-pound pack," our tester says. "While the rest of the crew was constantly changing layers, I cruised the whole way—five hours of uphill—in the Dual Aspect, without ever having to adjust." That's because body heat moves easily through the thinner areas in the gridlines, but the tight weave creates a microclimate against your skin. It's like our long-time Patagonia favorite, the R1 (a baselayer that moves moisture incredibly well), but with better weather-resistance and warmth. The DWR on the jacket's densely woven, exceptionally abrasion-resistant surface helps it repel precip like a conventional softshell.

► \$249; 14.2 oz. (w's M); patagonia.com

**EC LIVE**

See video reviews, plus behind-the-scenes footage from our test trip, in the iPad edition and at backpacker.com/ECsnow2015.

The Titan burns underwater, but it's a safety match, so it'll only light on the included striker.

UCO Titan Stormproof Match Kit

Rain, sleet, snow? If you need a fire in the worst conditions, these are your matches.

Be careful where you light these matches: Once lit, they're not going out. Dunk 'em in water and they reflate instantly; bury them in snow and they'll burn from underneath it for up to 23 seconds. They're long (4 inches) and tough enough to light with gloves on, which made us rethink bringing any other backup firestarter, ever. The secret? The

flammable part of the match extends halfway down the huge matchstick, meaning you get a chemical reaction burn for much longer than normal. Just make sure to pack out the sizeable detritus.

► \$10 for 12 matches in a floating, waterproof case (refills available); 2.8 oz.; ucogear.com



Full side zips let you vent during hard climbs, and they also make these pants easy to get on and off over boots.

Dynafit Mezzalama Alpha Pant

Breathable insulation makes these the most versatile winter pants we've tested.

Dramatic swings in temperature and stop-and-start travel can prompt a lot of wardrobe changes in winter. But the last thing you want to do is change your pants, so we often make do with legs that are a little too warm or a little too cold. Not so with the Mezzalamas. These light and packable pants use Polartec Alpha insulation (everywhere but the inner thigh and below the knees), a synthetic fill that breathes incredibly well, keeping us comfortable on climbs while still providing warmth on exposed ridgelines or when the weather turned. "I wore them all day while touring in the Rockies, and even kept them on when I got back to the hut," one tester says. "The water-resistant face fabric repels wet snow, so I only pulled a shell over them in the worst conditions." The low-profile fit is trim for puffy pants, so they fit well under a shell.

► \$229; 12.3 oz. (men's M); dynafit.com

SCOTT Air Free Alpride packs

A light, low-bulk airbag system means less weight on your back and more space for your gear.

Most skiers and snowboarders like the *idea* of an airbag pack—a welcome added safety measure in avalanche territory—until they confront the weight, price tag, and cumbersome nature of all the moving parts. But, thanks to a unique inflation system (called Alpride, an independent product unavailable in the U.S. until now), this new line of SCOTT packs goes a long way toward removing barriers. Instead of the large canisters of compressed air or nitrogen used in most airbag systems, Alpride uses twin mini cartridges of CO₂ and argon. The benefit is twofold: The Snickers-size cartridges shave about half a pound off the whole system—and a bunch of space. "It's so nice being able to fit layers and water—along with beacon, probe, shovel, and airbag system—in the packbag," says one veteran tester. "And, because the cartridges are so tiny, I didn't have any qualms about bringing multiples so I could deploy more than once per trip, if needed." A set (one each of CO₂ and argon) of the disposable cartridges rings in at about \$50 (buy them at an outfitter or online). Bonus: The system is TSA-friendly. (Last year's Editors' Choice-winning Black Diamond JetForce packs also solve some conventional airbag problems by using fans to deploy the airbag, but they're a bit heavier and considerably more expensive.)

► Starting at \$750 (options: 12 to 30 liters); 5 lbs. 2 oz. to 6 lbs. (with full system; depending on size); scott-sports.com



The Alpride airbag system is removable, so you can ditch it when skiing inbounds or outside avy territory.



A little play in the toe piece lets you turn hard without ejecting.

Dynafit Radical ST 2.0

Get a lightweight touring binding that won't prematurely release.



Tech bindings can make some skiers nervous. Too much force during an aggressive turn can cause you to pop out of the toe piece. That's why many strong skiers either switch to a heavier frame binding or make the risky decision to lock their toes into tour mode for descents. The Radical ST 2.0 is the solution. The key is a patented toe piece

that's finally available at a reasonable price (the company introduced it last year in the Beast 14, which costs about \$300 more). The tech-style toe sits on top of a unique base plate. The plate rotates freely, so any lateral force in a turn (that might otherwise pop the toe out of the pins) is absorbed by the 6- to 7mm of play on each side of the base plate. Practically, it lets your foot slide without releasing the binding, then snaps back into place. "It's like having an insurance policy for hard landings, yet it doesn't diminish uphill performance or add a ton of weight," said one tester after big days in Rocky Mountain National Park. Bonus: Like the Marker on page 72, this is one of the few tech bindings with DIN settings (the industry standard for release settings).

► \$550; 2 lbs. 6 oz. per pair; dynafit.com

Giro Range

It's the best-fitting helmet ever.

When it comes to helmets, fit is king. When it's wrong, it can distract you, or worse, cause you to skip wearing the helmet altogether. Until now, helmet designs looked like this: an adjustable inner cradle attached to a static shell. The Range works differently: It's the first-ever snow sports helmet with an adjustable shell, so fit is better than ever. The two-piece outer overlaps in the back, giving you almost 2 inches of play when you turn the dial at the base of the neck to expand or contract the circumference. "Instead of just sitting on top of your head, the Range feels like it's cradling the base of your skull," one tester says. This more customized fit not only feels better, but can help keep you safer in the event of a crash, when a wiggly helmet won't do you any favors. Luckily, we did not test that theory, but we can confirm the comfort: Interior padding is plush. And the lower profile means it fits better under a wider range of jacket hoods.

► \$240; 1 lb. 2 oz. (M); available in 3 sizes; giro.com

The rear fit dial is easy to operate, even with gloves on.



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High Sierra Symmetry 18

Save big on a full-featured ski pack.



You don't need to be on a budget to love a bargain. This backcountry ski and snowboard pack costs \$20 to \$100 less than the competition, and we found no tradeoffs in core performance. Plus, the Symmetry is nearly a pound lighter than its closest competitor. "I loaded up nearly 20 pounds of gear—water (it has an insulated hose sleeve), avy tools, extra clothes, and lashed-on skis," said one tester after a half-dozen day trips in Sweden and Iceland. "It

was comfortable mile after mile." The ski/snowboard straps and the hipbelt neatly tuck away into hidden compartments. The big, inverted U-shaped zipper let us open the pack up wide for easy access to the stretchy interior slots (perfect for skins and smaller items) and the probe sleeve. And we loved the exterior stuff-it sleeve: You can open the Velcro closure at the bottom to accommodate a shovel, or close it for use as a traditional pocket. More perks: A removable pocket on the left shoulder strap holds an iPhone 6 Plus, and the microfiber-lined goggle pocket is oversized to handle big lenses with no fuss. If there's a downside, we can't find it.

► \$80; 1 lb. 13 oz.; highsierra.com



Atomic Backland Carbon

Set your ankles free.

When you hike barefoot on an incline, your ankle flexes between 55 and 75 degrees. Touring boots typically flex between 30 and 60 degrees, which means you're fighting your physiology with every glide. Enter the Backland Carbon and its unprecedented 74 degrees of ankle articulation. Flip the no-fuss, glove-friendly lever into walk mode, remove the tongue, and you're in business. "I could take longer strides in the flats, and my shins remained blissfully bang-free on climbs," one tester says. A carbon spine shaves weight while keeping the cuff rigid in ski mode, and a cross lacing system replaces a buckle on the lower shell (wrapping the foot securely throughout) for better power transfer. The super-lightweight and narrow (98mm last) shell makes it dreamy when touring, but not around camp—our feet felt cramped and cold when we weren't moving. This boot is for adventurers with summit missions on the mind.

► \$900; 5 lbs. (26.5); atomic.com



Wide points of contact in the heel area give you extra turning power.

Marker KINGPIN 13

Resort or backcountry gear? Now you don't have to choose.

With the control and power transfer of a downhill binding and the uphill ability of a tech binding, the KINGPIN kills two birds with one stone, making it one of the only bindings we want to use both in-bounds and out. The key to its success: combining an innovative heel piece with a tech (pin-style) toe. Downhill performance is enhanced by a heel piece that provides an extra-wide area of contact between your AT boot and the binding, so you get more energy transfer from boot to ski. It's a noticeable difference. "The heel connection feels as solid as a conventional alpine/downhill binding, but the tech toe piece makes it much lighter, overall," says one tester. Bonus: It's one of only four tech bindings (the Dynafit Radical, page 70, is one of the others) that's DIN certified. When it comes to uphill performance, the tech toe piece makes for efficient skinning and, along with the frameless design, helps keep weight relatively low. We loved the flexibility the KINGPIN offers. "I could ski the resort one day, then do a long backcountry tour the next without compromising anything—or hassling with the cost and storage of another setup," one tester says.

► \$649; 3 lbs. 3 oz. per pair; markerusa.com



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THE IGNITELITE FLUX 60 HOODED JACKET.
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TREND REPORT
WHAT'S HOT IN
HARDSHELLS[BARGAIN
POWDER-
HOUND]
**Sherpa
Adventure
Gear Shakti**

Why we like it **This full-featured jacket is built for plundering powder.**

► **Fit & features** The Shakti's roomy cut, stretchy fabric, and articulated seaming allow for a full gamut of layering choices and range of motion. The powder skirt is removable. Seven pockets hold everything from climbing skins to lip balm. Nitpick: The zipper is sticky.

► **Breathability** The eVent membrane and thick, 40-denier polyester face ably handle abrasive pack straps and snaggy willows, but limit breathability. "I steamed up during faceplants that had me floundering in snow," our Alaska tester says. But for most tours, opening the pit zips kept him comfortable.

► **Protection** The wire-brimmed hood and tight cuffs kept precip from blowing in. But all the features, plus the rugged build, boost bulk and weight.

► \$295; 1 lb. 14 oz. (m's L); sherpaadventuregear.com

[SKI MOUNTAINEERING]

FlyLow Genius

Why we like it **Get top breathability and good mobility in one lightweight package.**

► **Breathability** "It breathes like a softshell but handles the weather like a hardshell," says one tester. The Polartec NeoShell membrane moved sweat fast enough to keep another tester dry throughout 1,000-foot climbs in Colorado's Nokhu Craggs. Two massive, mesh-lined chest pockets offer additional venting (and hold climbing skins).

► **Fit & features** Four-way stretch fabric and a roomy (not baggy) cut allow for full freedom of movement, which our tester appreciated when climbing steep couloirs. The grippy zipper pulls are easy to operate with gloves on. And thanks to the polyester (with 28 percent nylon) fabric, which is less expensive than all nylon, the Genius costs \$100 less than comparable shells.

► \$400; 1 lb. 1 oz. (m's L); flylow.com

► **STRETCH**

New waterproof/breathable membranes such as NeoShell (in the FlyLow Genius) can be paired with stretchy fabrics that provide exceptional freedom of movement.

► **SOFTNESS**

Even diehard alpinists balk at wearing stiff, loud fabrics, so companies have responded with softer options, like Gore-Tex C-Knit in the Arc'teryx Norvan and Zeta LT (page 66) and Patagonia Refugitive.

► **VENTING**

Companies are introducing new vent designs that lack zippers—they can't be sealed shut. The always-open vents enhance airflow yet still keep out rain. Check the Arc'teryx Norvan, below, and the Bergans Viul, page 78.

► **WOOL**

It's not just for baselayers anymore. Merino wool is showing up in some outerwear (Ortovox Guardian, next page) to wick sweat and boost warmth.

[YEAR-ROUND VERSATILITY]

Patagonia Refugitive

Why we like it **Its supple fabric proved stout enough for winter storms but light enough for summer wear.**



► **Construction** Two different shell fabrics are bonded to the standard Gore-Tex membrane to optimize breathability where you need it (the core) and durability where you need that (shoulders and arms). "Carrying a 55-pound pack up the mile-long climb to Colorado's Montgomery Pass Yurts, I grew only slightly damp," says one tester

who wore it over a baselayer on an overcast 30°F day. All zones use Gore's C-Knit backer, which is soft against skin, boosting comfort when worn over a T-shirt.

► **Fit & features** Cut narrow through the hips but roomy through the arms and chest, the Refugitive accommodates a midweight down sweater. The hood is cinchable with one hand, and fits over a helmet.

► \$499; 15 oz.; patagonia.com

[MOST BREATHABLE]

Arc'teryx Norvan

Why we like it **This well-ventilated featherweight can handle race-pace running and snowshoeing.**

► **Breathability** The Norvan assumes max output, all the time. Instead of pit zips, 5-inch, always-open underarm vents release heat and never leaked. Though not quite as air-gulping as big pit zips, they do a better job of sealing out wind and snow—and require no fuss. Wispy fabric also speeds wicking: The three-layer construction combines standard Gore-Tex with a supple C-Knit backer and 20-denier nylon that's tissue-thin, enhancing breathability. "It's perfect for winter running, speedy ski ascents, and breaking trail on snowshoes," says our Colorado tester. The tradeoff? The fabric lacks the abrasion-resistance for shouldering heavy packs.

► **Features** Minimalist details trim weight—the hem and cuffs are elasticized, not adjustable—and the head-hugging hood doesn't allow for a helmet.

► \$325; 7.5 oz.; arcteryx.com





ALPINISTO



The Gregory Alpinisto packs are the result of 38 years of experience in pack design and engineering. With time-tested technology focused on alpine functionality, these packs will deliver results on any mountain pursuit. The proprietary Fusion Flex suspension includes climbing specific hipbelts and a shoulder harness to maintain comfort during technical ascents. A fully strippable suspension system reduces weight when speed and energy conservation matter most.

The **ALPINISTO** is available in 35 & 50 L
at **GREGORYPACKS.COM**





[PACKABLE BARGAIN]
Mountain Standard Hooded 3-Layer

Why we like it **It's one of the most affordable three-layer shells we've tested.**

► **Cost** This new Colorado brand, started by a Boulder design shop with a long history in the outdoor industry, cuts prices by selling direct

to consumers. In this case, that means you get the durability of a three-layer shell—a liner protects the membrane—for much less than usual.

► **Protection** “Two days of rain turned the snow to junk on a ski tour in Idaho’s Sawtooth Wilderness,” says a tester, “but staying dry in this jacket kept my spirits up.”

► **Fit & features** The roomy cut gave broad-shouldered testers plenty of mobility and layering options, but thinner guys found it a bit baggy, especially in the chest. (Note: Tall guys might wish for a little longer hem.) The hood is large enough to fit over any helmet. Yet the jacket is still relatively packable—about the size of a liter bottle.

► **Breathability** Although the jacket has no pit zips and is less breathable than top-shelf shells—testers deemed it adequate for moderate exertion in cold temperatures—it costs half as much.

► \$200; 1 lb. 1 oz. (BACKPACKER scales); mountainstandard.com

[LIGHT & TOUGH]
adidas Outdoor Terrex TechRock GTX

Why we like it **This streamlined shell is tough enough for week-long expeditions.**

► **Durability** The Gore-Tex Pro Shell membrane (Gore’s most durable offering) proved plenty rugged for our tester, a professional guide who wore it daily through five months of ski touring, ice climbing, and mountaineering. So did the 100-percent nylon plain untextured weave. Adidas claims the smooth face is less likely to tear than a ripstop one, which has raised yarns that can grab on rock and ice. Though tough, the 40-denier face fabric is thin enough to move moisture fast without sacrificing weather protection. “It’s as breathable and compact as lighter, less durable jackets I’ve used,” a tester says.

► **Fit & features** The details are tailored for climbing. The fully adjustable hood fits over helmets (even oversize ski models). The two chest pockets sit high above a hipbelt or harness, and one is large enough for climbing skins. And the cozy, high, merino-lined collar is perforated to allow exhalation moisture to escape—it doesn’t eliminate goggle fogging entirely, but it does minimize it. Despite the body-hugging fit, articulated sleeves provided excellent freedom of movement while one tester was climbing New Hampshire’s Shoestring Gully.

► \$494; 15 oz.; adidas.com/us/outdoor



[DURABLE WORKHORSE]
The North Face FuseForm Brigandine 3L

Why we like it **This is ski armor, built for 100-day seasons, year after year.**

► **Durability** All the zones where a backpack meets fabric—hips, lower back, and shoulders—use burly, 90-denier Cordura nylon in a tweed-like jacquard weave for extra thickness. Months of near-daily touring and repeatedly shouldering skis produced no fuzzing on that fabric. Those armored zones blend seamlessly into the rest of the jacket, thanks to FuseForm construction, which weaves in various fabrics rather than stitching them together, reducing seams. And fewer seams means fewer wear points and less potential for leakage.

► **Protection** Cinch down the fully adjustable, helmet-compatible hood, and you’ve got a bunker that makes the fiercest storms feel tolerable. The Brigandine proved waterproof through hours of wet snow on Colorado’s Buffalo Pass. The tradeoff is weight and packability: It’s better worn than carried.

► \$499; 2 lbs. 1 oz.; thenorthface.com

[EDITORS’ CHOICE]
Arc’teryx Zeta LT

Turn to page 66 to read about our favorite shell of the season.



[WARMEST]
Ortovox Guardian Shell

Why we like it **The merino wool lining speeds wicking and reduces the need for a bulky midlayer.**

► **Warmth** Cold-weather explorers who struggle to stay warm raved about this three-layer nylon shell, which marries a waterproof/breathable membrane to a thin merino backer. “It kept me from feeling chilled as soon as I stopped skinning,” reports our tester, who was able to dispense with her bulky mid-weight puffy while hiking and skiing near Banff. The wool also keeps sweat from condensing on the inside of the fabric, which remained dry to the touch even after rigorous exertion. Caveat: Even with the pit zips open, hot-running hikers overheated in 20°F temps.

► **Fit** The cut is body-hugging and long, providing extra coverage through the hips and upper thighs (and a good fit for tall folks). Arms are also long, so the sleeves never got yanked out of place during steep bootpacks.

► **Features** A removable powder skirt seals in heat; a huge, brimmed hood slides easily over the largest ski helmets; and an ultrahigh collar shields the chin and nose from icy winds. The merino lining compromises packability (compressed, it’s volleyball-size) making it best for missions that necessitate wearing a shell from door to door. Ouch: Warmth and features don’t come cheap.

► \$749; 1 lb. 14 oz.; ortovox.com



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[JACKET OF ALL TRADES]

Outdoor Research Linchpin Hooded

Why we like it **It's optimized for ice climbing, but adaptable to most cold-weather adventures.**

► **Versatility** Pockets are big enough for skins or bulky gloves, which allowed testers to climb using thin gloves and easily grab extra insulation during belays. An unusually large chest pocket keeps a sandwich where it won't freeze. And the two-way front zipper accommodates a harness and belay device.

► **Protection** Made entirely with Gore Windstopper, the Linchpin seals out the strongest gusts and proved impressively water-resistant; seams aren't taped, but the DWR treatment kept the fabric from wetting out in all-day snow. An inset collar seals out wind even when the helmet-compatible hood isn't deployed. A wire brim blocks spindrift.

► **Ventilation** The weather-thwarting fabric isn't especially breathable, so zippered hem-to-biceps vents provide moisture management. "That huge opening let me dump heat while climbing, then zip up for belay," says our tester, who wore it while climbing Mt. Rainier and at New Hampshire's Frankenstein Cliffs. Tradeoff: It's bulky when packed (about football size).

► \$295; 1 lb. 6 oz.; outdoor-research.com

[BREATHABLE LIGHTWEIGHT]

Dynafit Chugach Windstopper

Why we like it **This sweat-fighter is ideal for big climbs.**

► **Breathability** Half of the jacket (the dark part) uses a traditional softshell material (a very air-permeable, stretch-woven nylon with no membrane to trap heat) that whisks vapor to the exterior. "Sweat buildup was nonexistent," says a tester who wore it on backcountry ski tours near Canmore, Alberta. That fabric's generous stretch also provides outstanding freedom of movement: "Like a baselayer," she says.

► **Protection** Highly water-resistant Gore Windstopper is employed across the chest, shoulders, and hood—areas most exposed to the elements—and it kept us dry during snowstorms (seams aren't taped). Its total protection against wind eliminates the need to pull on a hardshell on gusty summits and ridgelines.

► **Fit & features** Cut long, for full coverage through the hips and seat, the jacket accommodates long torsos and arms. The hood tucks away for an uncluttered, fair-weather silhouette, and multiple pockets hold touring essentials. Bonus: It packs small (to Nalgene size).

► \$400; 1 lb. 3 oz. (men's M); dynafit.com/us



[ULTRALIGHT WARMTH]

Bergans Viul

Why we like it **It wicks sweat and repels wind during race-pace efforts.**

► **Fit & features** The Viul compresses to bocce-ball size thanks to its streamlined design. There's no hood, the 3-inch collar reaches to just below the chin (use a Buff in windy conditions), and the cuffs and hem use non-adjustable elastic. The two mesh-lined hand pockets double as core vents, and the fit is close—best when worn over just a lightweight baselayer.

► **Breathability** Each side panel features 4-inch-long, always-open vents that dump heat and moisture, even when you're wearing a pack. Throughout the

chest and back, a hanging fishnet liner made of 100-percent merino wool wicks sweat to the outer shell. "The mesh kept me feeling cozy and dry, even after strenuous, 700-foot climbs," says our Colorado tester.

► **Protection** The merino liner provides low-bulk warmth appropriate for 10°F forays on skis or snowshoes. And the windproof Pertex Classic Eco shell kept our tester from feeling chilled during skate skiing, running, and other hard-charging exploits: "It was exactly what I needed for temperature regulation above treeline," she says. The tightly woven nylon repels dry snow and brief showers.

► \$199; 14 oz.; shop.bergans.us

[BEST ALL-AROUND]

Marmot Zion

Why we like it **Meet the most comfortable jacket of the year. Period.**

► **Fit & features** Testers didn't want to take this off—not after skiing, and not even come summer, when they wore it on high-alpine hikes in 45°F temps. "The softshell fabric is just so supple and buttery," says one. Credit the new, lightened-up, three-layer Polartec NeoShell, which makes this year's Zion 30 percent lighter than the previous version. It's backed by a soft, peach-fuzz polyester lining that kept testers from feeling clammy during 1,200-foot ski ascents in Nevada's Ruby Mountains.

► **Protection** Waterproof and seam-taped, the Zion shed drippy spring snow in Colorado's Indian Peaks, and the helmet-compatible hood kept us warm on a gusty, 10°F day in Utah's Wasatch Range.

► **Ventilation** We love NeoShell's breathability, but it still traps more sweat vapor than non-waterproof softshells. The Zion is breathable enough for leisurely tours, and pit zips kept sweat buildup to a tolerable level while we were climbing.

► \$400; 1 lb. 9 oz. (m's M); marmot.com



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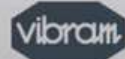
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GORE-TEX® Extended Comfort lining is paired with the new GORE-TEX® SURROUND™ product technology to create 360° of lightweight waterproof breathability.



Nano Cells PU Grid is directly injected onto 3D mesh upper for superior airflow & breathability; providing the perfect balance between protection, ventilation, & support.



XS Trek compound in the Vibram® sole is ideal for trekking and multi-sport use.



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[BOMBER]

Black Diamond Recon

Why we like it **Its rugged construction makes it tough enough for years of fierce weather.**

- **Protection** Whereas some softshells are best-suited for moderate-weather touring, the Recon is optimized for nature's worst. DWR-treated Gore Windstopper with sealed seams kept our Colorado tester warm and dry through blizzards at Vail (after hours of sloppy snow, the jacket grew heavier, but didn't leak). The voluminous hood fits over chunky ski helmets, a powder skirt seals out blowing snow, and the nose-high, fleece-lined collar acts as a cheek-warmer.
- **Durability** Thick, 70-denier nylon face fabric makes the Recon heavier than most softshells (it's also pricier than most), but it stands up to hard use. "It feels like a suit of armor, which I really appreciated on cold, windy days," says one tester who found that bashing pine branches took no toll on the fabric.
- **Fit** The loose, boxy cut accommodates bulky midlayers.
- **Breathability** The underarms use stretchy, air-permeable Schoeller nylon that allowed for some ventilation when we were yo-yo-ing powderfields in Rocky Mountain National Park. But the Recon's wheelhouse is short sidecountry tours sandwiched between bone-chilling lift rides. "This is definitely a warm jacket for cold days and bad weather," concludes one tester.
- \$499; 1 lb. 9 oz. (m's M); blackdiamondequipment.com

[WATERPROOF]

Mountain Hardwear Straight Chuter

Why we like it **Get waterproof protection that won't soak you in sweat.**

- **Protection** The supple Dry.Q fabric and taped seams afford total defense against sustained rain and snow. "Even when I got drenched with icemelt, I stayed dry inside," reports one ice-climbing tester. The high, fleecy collar provides cozy refuge from howling winds, and the two-way adjustable hood fits over most helmets. Thanks to the heat-trapping, heavyweight fabric, we could wear fewer layers underneath to enjoy low-bulk freedom of movement.
- **Breathability** "Apart from a swampy back under a pack, I stayed dry when climbing," says a ski-touring tester. It's too heavy for full-throttle workouts, but performs well on moderate hikes in cold (sub-40°F) temperatures.
- **Durability** "I had one of my gnarliest tomahawk crashes ever in this jacket and managed to slice my arm, but the sleeve didn't tear," says our Colorado tester. That's probably because the thick, 40-denier nylon stretches (rather than rips) when stressed. Tradeoff? It's a heavyweight.
- \$450; 1 lb. 13 oz. (m's M); mountainhardwear.com



[MOST BREATHABLE]

Ternua Snowmass

Why we like it **This airy top keeps pace with high-intensity workouts.**

- **Breathability** Think of this as a silky baselayer with a smidge of protection against wind and chill—and a lot of protection against sweat. The lightweight, stretchy fabric is neither waterproof nor windproof, but it maximizes moisture release: The brushed, polyester lining wicks and dries fast. "Sometimes I wore it next-to-skin because it minimizes clamminess so well," says a tester. Note: The thin, satiny fabric isn't intended for abrasive punishment.
- **Fit & features** The sleek, body-hugging cut accommodates a light baselayer, but nothing bulkier, and it works well under other layers. Four-way stretch and articulated seaming through the arms allow for unlimited movement. And the high-collared, close-fitting hood serves as a balaclava that kept skiers cozy in 20°F temperatures.
- \$180; 10 oz.; ternua.com



TREND REPORT

WHAT'S HOT IN
SOFTSHELLS

- **THEY'RE SOFTER** As hardshells become more breathable and softshells become more water-resistant, the line between the two is getting blurred. One way softshells have stayed a breed apart: improved softness. Extraordinarily supple, feel-good fabrics, like the ones used in the Marmot Zion and Ternua Snowmass, are keeping softshell devotees coming back for more.
- **THEY'RE WATER-PROOF** More than ever, softshells are encroaching on hardshell territory with waterproof/breathable fabrics (like those used in the Mountain Hardwear Straight Chuter and Marmot Zion). But the technology isn't quite ready to make hardshells obsolete. Waterproof softshells are heavier and less compressible than their hard-shell competition.
- **THEY'RE GOING HYBRID** You no longer have to choose between a hardshell or softshell, because designers are increasingly seaming both fabrics together. Jackets such as the Dynafit Chugach and the Black Diamond Recon place weather-resistant fabric across the upper chest, shoulders, and hood (which take the brunt of wind and snow) and use ultrabreathable softshell in the sweatier zones.

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3
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women's
pick

[THERMALLY EFFICIENT]

Big Agnes Spike/ Lucky Penny

Why we like it **Warm your core with heat-reflecting insulation.**

► **Warmth** How can insulation get warmer without getting thicker? By reflecting body heat back toward you. Pinneco Core synthetic insulation (exclusive to Big Agnes) does the trick with the addition of a breathable membrane that's adhered to the outer surface of the polyester fill. It lets sweat vapor escape, but pushes heat back into the insulation, where it can circulate around you. Also, the vest's quilting doesn't go all the way through to the liner material, thus reducing cold spots along the stitchlines.

► **Fit** The cut is contoured; you don't look puffy around the middle like with so many vests. Generous armholes allow maximum freedom of movement.

► **Features** We like the open-top interior mesh pockets, which are perfect for quickly stashing gloves or a hat. The front zipper is backed with a substantial draft tube; long zipper pulls are easy to grab. Nitpick: We wished for some fuzzy material near the chin, as the polyester there can get cold and wet.

► \$150; 8 oz.; bigagnes.com

[ULTRALIGHT SYNTHETIC]

Berghaus VapourLight Hydroloft Reversible Race Smock

Why we like it **It's the lightest synthetic midlayer we've ever tried.**

► **Packability** It stuffs to the size of an orange thanks to the wispy fabrics and a gram-shaving half zip.

► **Reversible** We wore it with the denser (two-tone) nylon outside to block the famously wicked wind in Patagonia, where we saw 50-mph gusts. When the skies were calm, we'd turn it inside out, so the more breathable nylon (solid color, shown) let in a bit of air, which circulated inside and kept us from overheating. The thin-but-lofty layer of synthetic insulation "feels like a cloud" reports our tester. "After a gale-force storm in Torres Del Paine ripped off my pack cover and soaked everything inside, I put on the jacket damp and felt warm in no time."

► **Fit** It's slightly relaxed, which makes pulling it on easy. Elasticized cuffs and hem keep drafts out and prevent the jacket from riding up and exposing skin while climbing.

► **Versatility** Packed size is negligible—there's no reason not to bring this on every trip. "It worked equally well as my on-the-move midlayer in cold conditions and my main insulator on summer trips," our tester says.

► \$200; 5.5 oz. (men's M); usa.berghaus.com



[ULTRALIGHT DOWN]

Columbia Decompression

Why we like it **You get maximum warmth with minimal weight and bulk.**

► **Materials** Pair the highest quality down (1,000-fill goose) with a heat-reflective liner (this has a similar effect to the Pinneco Core, left) and a DWR-treated, light-weight (10-denier) ripstop nylon shell, and what do you get? The holy grail of puffy jackets: ultratoasty and so feathery that you can hardly feel the weight of it on your body. "I wore it on every single trip last winter, sometimes with just a baselayer underneath, sometimes with a shell on top," one editor says. "Backcountry skiing

in spring with heavy, wet snow coming down, skinning above treeline on Colorado's Loveland Pass on a 3°F January day, resort skiing at Copper Mountain in the 30s and 40s, and in camp around Upper Montgomery Yurt down to 25°F."

► **Breathability** Despite its warmth, we found it remarkably breathable when we were on the move in freezing temps. Sweat vapor just dissipates through the super-light fabrics.

► **Fit** Cut is relaxed through the torso, but long, so it prevents drafts from sneaking in at your waistline when you bend over to adjust bindings or stake a tent. The hood doesn't fit over a helmet, but is plenty warm under one. Two side cinches let you snug it down over a beanie, but some testers wished for a third adjustment point to really crank it down for maximum thermal efficiency. If you want to splurge on something you'll take on pretty much every winter trip, you'll get your money's worth. Sorry, ladies: men's only.

► \$400; 9 oz. (men's M); columbia.com

[WARMEST]

The North Face Summit L6

Why we like it **It kept us warm on seven trips up Mt. Rainier.**

► **Warmth** "This thing is a heat machine," says our mountain guide tester, who wore it down to about 0°F. The jacket is chock-full of 800-fill goose down with welded (no stitch) baffles that eliminate cold spots.

► **Features** Clearly, designers agonized over the small stuff. We love the two pass-through chest pockets because we could access stuff from inside or out. The internal stretch-mesh stuff pockets held our gloves or glasses (they're too small for a water bottle) securely because, instead of being open at the top as in most belay jackets, these are stitched halfway closed. And the waterproof zips on the hand pockets never jammed thanks to six parallel lines of stitching that kept fabric out of the way. But our tester says he could do without the long, stretchy "hobo mitts" that cover the hands and wrists. "You have to take your gloves off get the jacket on and off, which just exposes your hands," he says.

► \$500; 1 lb. 15 oz.; thenorthface.com



PHOTOS BY COURTESY



[ACTIVE INSULATION]

Outdoor Research Uberlayer Hooded

Why we like it **You can put it on the morning and wear it all day long.**

► **Versatility** Breathable when it needs to vent, warm when it needs to insulate. This jacket became a second skin for one tester who wore it nonstop for four days of ice climbing in New Hampshire, then around-the-clock on a four-day summer climb of Mt. Rainier. There is no single magic ingredient. It's the full recipe at work: Polartec Alpha, an insulation with thousands of tiny perforations that allow body heat to escape, is sandwiched between a wicking polyester liner and tough-but-supple nylon shell. "It's an ideal outer layer when you're grinding hard uphill in deep cold, and it makes a low-bulk midlayer under a shell," one tester says.

► **Features** The hood fits over a climbing helmet, but also adjusts snugly over a beanie. Five pockets (two interior) store winter must-haves. A sturdy, two-way zipper let us vent from top or bottom and access a climbing harness. We liked the clean cuffs (they have Lycra inserts to block wind) which play nicely with other layers and gloves.

► **Packability** You'll be wearing this jacket way more than packing it, but you can squish it down to about 7 by 5 inches in its own pocket. It's a bit on the heavy side compared to other midlayers, but that's a price we're willing to pay for its versatility.

► \$299; 1 lb. 4 oz. (men's L); outdoorresearch.com



EDITORS' CHOICE

Patagonia Dual Aspect Hoody

See page 65 to read about this versatile, low-bulk jacket.



[COOL-WEATHER HYBRID]

Brooks-Range Hybrid Wool

Why we like it **It's a warm-yet-breathable technical layer that looks good enough for a night out.**

► **Hybrid construction** With breathable Polartec Alpha insulation in the core and Power Wool (also by Polartec) in the sleeves and down the sides, this layer proved indispensable during our gear editor's trek to Everest basecamp last April. "Over a tee, it was the perfect amount of core warmth in 30 to 50°F temps as we climbed up the Khumbu Valley," she says. "Yet the stretchy Power Wool let my body heat escape when I worked up a sweat." But she wished they skipped the Alpha in the back area: "When I was wearing a pack, that's the first place that overheated."

► **Fit** The silhouette is trim, but not sausage-tight; it pairs well with other layers. A high, stand-up, fleece-lined collar traps warmth.

► \$250; 13 oz.; brooks-range.com

[BARGAIN]

Craghoppers CompressLite Packaway

Why we like it **It's a screaming deal.**

► **Features** Testers did a double take when we revealed how affordable this synthetic puffy is. The features are streamlined (simple elastic cuffs, for example) without feeling stripped-down. The big, fat main zipper was easy to use even with gloves on. And the fleece-lined, zippered handwarmer pockets kept our fingers toasty when we were hanging out on the porch at Colorado's Montgomery Pass Yurt even as temps dipped below freezing. Dings: Our packs' hipbelts partially block those pockets, and their zippers are too small for gloves. The hood (not helmet-compatible) contoured well around our heads, but we wished it cinched down when the cold came in and the wind kicked up.

► **Fit** Good stretch in the sleeves and midsection allow for a wide range of motion and no tugging, even during scrambles on 13,294-foot James Peak.

► **Warmth** It's best for light activity, as breathability is minimal (we got steamy on the that James Peak outing), but it worked as our warmest layer down into the mid-30s, and as part of a system in colder weather. It squishes down to about the size of a liter water bottle.

► \$85; 15 oz.; us.craghoppers.com





[PRECISION PERFORMANCE]

Cabela's + Icebreaker Merino Thermal Zone Half-Zip Top & Bottoms

Why we like them **Three different fabric weights combine to deliver a premium all-conditions suit.**

- **Versatility** Bodymapping—strategically matching different fabrics to different parts of the body—aims to maximize both warmth and breathability, and the Thermal Zone delivers. Heavyweight merino in the core and outer arms kept us cozy down to -10°F in New Hampshire's Crawford Notch State Park. But thinner patches—medium-weight merino on the biceps and knees and lightweight merino on the inner arms and groin—meant they didn't swamp out when we were climbing and skiing into the 40s, either. Caveat: Finely calibrated thermal regulation like this isn't cheap.
- **Wicking** The thinner wool panels pulled moisture from our sweatiest zones quickly—perfect for high-output endeavors in bitter cold.
- **Stink resistance** Merino is tops in this department. "I could convince myself I was pulling on clean layers on day four of a backcountry hut trip," one tester says.
- **Fit** They're relaxed but not baggy, with a stay-tucked hem and long arms. Skiers liked that the thinnest merino on the lower shins fit well inside boots.
- **\$150, 10 oz. (top); \$150, 7 oz. (bottoms); cabelas.com**

[MOST COMFORTABLE]

Mountain Hardwear Buttermen 1/2 Zip

Why we like it **You get a super-soft feel with maximum range of motion.**

- **Feel** "The most comfortable tech shirt I've worn—on par with a five-year-old cotton hoodie," one tester says. The smooth, silky feel comes from the sanded stretch jersey polyester fabric, which has a brushed inner surface for an ultraplush touch. Very stretchy fabric (15 percent elastane) accommodates all motion.
- **Wicking** Excellent (as we expect from a synthetic). "I never felt clammy," says one Colorado tester who wore it biking, backcountry skiing, and cross-country skiing. Even in the toughest conditions—long, strenuous days in cold rain—it kept a Washington biologist feeling dry while he was tracking wolverines in the Cascades.
- **Stink resistance** A chemical antimicrobial finish creates a physical barrier against bacteria, making it better than average for a synthetic: One tester didn't even need to wash it after a three-day backcountry hut trip in Colorado's Never Summer Mountains.
- **\$78; 6 oz.; mountainhardwear.com**



[LIGHTEST]

Patagonia Capilene Lightweight Crew

Why we like it **This ultralight top kept testers comfy and dry well into summertime—and it's eco-friendly.**

- **Wicking** We took this uber-thin Capilene (100 percent polyester) layer all over the map, from backcountry ski trips in Canada to a summit push on Rainier to a 60-story Seattle stair climb. Every time, it wowed in the

wicking department. "This was my go-to baselayer when I knew I would be moving—it keeps you cool when you're pushing hard uphill," says one tester who wore it backcountry skiing into the low 20s. But even when she was trudging up a snowfield on a 65°F, sunny day, she says, "It never felt soaked against my skin." A grid pattern on the inside pulls sweat to the outside for quick evaporation.

- **Green cred** It's made with 100-percent recycled fabric.
- **Stink resistance** For a synthetic, we were pleased with how fresh this smelled after sweaty trips. We could get three to four wears out of it before laundry day. Credit a Polygiene silver chloride treatment that stymies bacterial growth.
- **\$49; 3.5 oz.; patagonia.com**

[WARMEST]

VOORMI Thermal II Baselayer

Why we like it **The merino/polyester construction offers cold-busting insulation.**

- **Warmth** VOORMI's wool comes from Rocky Mountain sheep, a subspecies of merino that produces especially crimped wool fibers. VOORMI says this makes for more insulating air pockets when worn under a layer and better breathability when worn alone. We say this midweight top felt toasty even in punishing temps. "I felt comfortable at -8°F on a snowshoe trip," says a tester. A high, snug neck locks in heat. But it's too warm for anything above the mid-40s.
- **Wicking** A superfine inner layer of polyester siphons moisture off the skin and into the wool outer layer. There, water evaporates without leaving you with that cold-fish feeling. The pull-push action worked, but if you sweat it out, the merino takes forever to dry.
- **Stink resistance** The high wool content (90 percent) kept this shirt smelling fresh for three to four days of sweaty mountaineering at a time (better than the Westcomb, page 86, which uses wool/poly with the opposite construction).
- **\$129; 9.6 oz.; voormi.com**





TRILOGY LIMITED SERIES

**“NEVER HESITATE
TO SHAKE UP HABITS”**

[BACKCOUNTRY SKIER'S CHOICE]

Bambool BTI Base Layer Top & Pants

Why we like them **A cozy PJ feel meets powder-friendly design.**

► **Feel** The best blended-fabric baselayers cherry-pick the component materials' strengths and offset their weaknesses—and that's exactly the case with these 68-percent bamboo/27-percent merino/5-percent elastane layers. You get the soft feel and quick-dry magic of bamboo, plus the odor control and warm-when-wet properties of wool. "They don't feel plasticky or prickly when your skin heats up," says a tester.

► **Boot-friendly** The mid-calf bottoms don't bunch with socks.

► **\$75; 10 oz. (top); \$60; 6 oz. (bottom);** bamboolthermics.com



[QUICK-DRYING WOOL]

Westcomb Luminous

Why we like it **This simple layer's double-sided fabric delivers great wicking, insulation, and durability.**

► **Wicking** Polartec's new Power Wool fabric takes the opposite approach of the VOORMI (page 84): It places hydrophilic merino on the inside to absorb moisture and better regulate body temperature, and hydrophobic polyester on the exterior. The idea is that the wool absorbs sweat, then synthetic fibers pull it out for faster drying. Does it work? "I soaked my back on a broiling snow climb up Oregon's South Sister," says one tester. "It felt mostly dry in 15 minutes, and totally dry in 30 (faster than the VOORMI)."

► **Warmth** "You definitely get that 'warm when wet' magic of wool," a tester says. "Even when I was sweaty and winds picked up on Washington's Tiger Mountain, it insulated me and prevented the flash-freeze feeling." Bonus: Polyester on the outside adds abrasion resistance. Note: The crew is a women's-only style. The men's version is the ¾-zip Nova (\$170).

► **Stink resistance** "After four hard days on Chile's Torres del Paine circuit, this top still smelled OK—not exactly fresh, but not horrifying, either," reports a tester.

► **\$130; 5.7 oz. (w's M); women's only; westcomb.com**

[MOISTURE MOVER]

Salomon Park LS Tee

Why we like it **Natural bamboo charcoal fibers make it the quickest-drying, most breathable layer in our test.**

► **Wicking** "Supremely effective," says a high-octane Washington tester who took the Park skate skiing, winter trail running, and cycling all over the Cascades. "It even dried out between rain showers when it got repeatedly soaked on a drizzly day on Tiger Mountain." The secret sauce: Polyester blended with bamboo charcoal fibers, which have excellent absorption (speeding wicking) and natural microgaps within the fibers (making for superior ventilation).

► **Warmth** Don't choose the Park for low-effort, low-temperature trips. The thin fabric is best suited for aerobic sports in moderate temps. Bonus: UPF 50 sun protection.

► **Fit** It's silky and smooth but not very stretchy, and runs a bit small. Consider sizing up.

► **Stink resistance** Though bamboo charcoal supposedly has natural antibacterial qualities, we found this shirt pretty average in the smelliness category. "The stink was definitely noticeable after a day of running or skiing, but I've smelled worse, and it mostly, but not completely, washed out," notes one tester.

► **\$55 (m's), \$60 (w's); 7.8 oz.; salomon.com**



► **DOUBLE-SIDED FABRICS** Bicomponent fabrics—that is, two different materials layered on top of each other, not blended—promise superior wicking and durability. Some brands place merino wool next-to-skin (like Westcomb, left), while others flip it, with synthetic threads on the inside (VOORMI, page 84). Performance will vary based on a garment's poly/wool ratio and thickness, but judging by the layers we tested, wool outside is warmer and smells better, while poly outside is wicker and dried faster.

► **BAMBOO** Fibers made from this fast-growing grass enhance wicking and odor control (see Bambool and Salomon reviews, left).

► **SOFTNESS** Superfine synthetic fibers and sanded jersey fabrics (see Mountain Hardwear, page 84) add a cotton T-shirt feel to technical layers.

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[TRAIL TO TOWN]
Salomon Pulse

Why we like it **A yoga-style waistband and breathable fabric make this softshell ideal for snowshoeing, fat-biking, Nordic skiing—and running errands afterward.**

- **Comfort** The wide waistband feels soft and unrestricting, even after eight-hour days and during hard aerobic efforts. The supremely stretchy fabric (nylon with 8 percent spandex, lined with polyester microfleece) let our tester stride out when Nordic skiing or cycling.
 - **Versatility** “They’re my favorite all-around winter aerobic pant because the clean silhouette transitions so seamlessly between the sports I love and going to the store or picking up kids,” says a tester.
 - **Weather protection** The thighs use windproof fabric that kept our tester from feeling chilled during workouts. Everywhere else, breathable nylon quickly dumps heat and sweat. It was the perfect combination for keeping us cool during high-aerobic sports while also keeping the wind out, which is always the killer. And although it’s not fully waterproof, it repelled snow and graupel.
- \$130; 13 oz. (w’s M); salomon.com/us

[SOFT AND TOUGH]
Fjällräven Vidda Pro

Why we like it **These all-purpose pants can take a beating.**

- **Durability** “I’ve punished these pants for 28 straight days in the field,” reports one tester who wore them bushwhacking in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Fjällräven’s G-1000 fabric (65 percent cotton and 35 percent polyester) is legendary in Sweden for its durability, and now we know why. The wax treatment makes them water-resistant without inhibiting breathability (we’ve used them in temps ranging from 30 to 85°F), yet they feel surprisingly soft to the touch and dry fast. Reinforcement patches on the butt and from knee to mid-shin provide extra armor in scuff-prone places.
 - **Pockets** Seven pockets swallow all your winter extras (sunscreen, sunglasses, snacks). “I loaded the thigh pockets up with my spare lenses,” says our photographer-tester. “I loved having them all within easy reach; no fumbling in my pack.” Downside: All those pockets, plus the tough fabric, increase weight.
- \$150; 1 lb. 4 oz.; fjallraven.us



[BOMBPROOF BIB]
Millet Crystal Mountain GTX Bib

Why we like it **This rugged Gore-Tex softshell is a diehard skier’s work pant.**

- **Durability** The 80-denier nylon let our tester bash through branches with abandon: A season of hard use resulted in no signs of abrasion, even on the cuffs (which feature tough Cordura kick patches).
 - **Breathability** After lugging a 60-pound sled up a steep grade for 3 miles, our tester reported outstanding breathability. Credit the zippered, 20-inch-long thigh vents (three zipper heads facilitate a multitude of opening options, including a drop seat) and the peach-fuzz polyester lining (which wicks sweat away to the nylon face fabric). This bib also proved totally waterproof in heavy, wet spring snow, thanks to sealed seams and a Gore-Tex membrane (used everywhere but on the backpanel, which is breathable Pertex Equilibrium).
 - **Fit & features** The Euro-style fit is body-hugging, but the articulated knees and stretchy fabric let our tester bootpack up steep pitches without feeling pinched. The pockets (one on the chest, two on the hips) are easy to operate while wearing gloves. Bottom line: The price is steep, but the pants pay off with stellar durability, fit, and performance.
- \$450; 1 lb. 9 oz.; milletusa.com





[BARGAIN RAINWEAR]
adidas Outdoor 2.5L Wandertag Climaproof

Why we like it **This basic pair of rainpants gets the job done for less.**

► **Features** If you pack rainpants “just in case,” do you really need a lot of extras? This minimalist design says no. There’s an elastic

waistband, two zippered hand pockets, and ankle zippers that extend to the knee. “I love how easy it is to take them off,” says our tester, who wore them through innumerable passing showers while thru-hiking the AT. Packed, they’re no bigger than a softball.

► **Comfort** The zippered pockets caused no chafing beneath a pack, and the fabric proved waterproof even in the hardest downpours. The breathability of the Climaproof membrane is also impressive. “Even in 45°F temps, I never felt overly hot or damp,” our AT tester says.

► **Durability** The thin, 50-denier ripstop nylon enhances breathability, but, like most just-in-case rainpants, these pants are best suited for on-trail wear rather than off-trail scrambling.

► \$89; 8 oz.; adidas.com/us/outdoor

[BREATHABLE HYBRID]
Patagonia Reconnaissance

Why we like it **We could climb in comfort—snow or shine.**

► **Weather protection** All seams are taped, and knees, seat, and hips feature three-layer hardshell construction that kept these key places from wetting out during puking snow in Colorado’s Park Range. But the rest of the pants use a non-waterproof softshell for max breathability and stretch. “They excel during high-output days,” says one tester. However, he felt chilled in winds above 20 mph.



► **Durability** The emphasis here is delivering lightweight breathability, not resist-all armor. There’s a scuff patch on the inner ankle, but it’s not huge (our tester managed to tear the fabric above it with his crampon), making these pants best for ski touring.

► \$349; 1 lb.; patagonia.com

[VERSATILE SOFTSHELL]
Outdoor Research Iceline

Why we like it **Fleece insulation makes this pant ideal for all things cold.**



► **Protection** During chilly, sleety, stop-and-go tours—where Canadian wind made 20°F feel like 0—the windproof nylon/spandex fabric, backed with a warm layer of gridded polyester fleece, kept our legs comfortable.

► **Fit & features** The flat, high-backed waist insulated our tester’s lower back and was comfortable under a harness during frigid ascents in New York’s Adirondacks. The 14-inch thigh zips offer great ventilation during approaches, and the cuff gaiter accommodates both mountaineering and ski boots.

► \$245; 1 lb. 5 oz. (m’s L); outdoor-research.com

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[MOST DURABLE]
L.L.Bean Snowfield 30

Why we like it **It's exceptionally tough for the weight and price.**

- **Durability** "I pride myself on my sharp ski edges," says our New York-based tester. "I've had them cut through pack cloth before, but this pack bites right back." Credit the heavy-duty (210-denier) ripstop nylon with a reinforced front pocket. Hypalon-reinforced straps secure a snowboard for a wiggle-free carry, then tuck away when not needed, while compression straps kept our super-fat skis secure. The pack doesn't have a scratch, even after 25 ski days through grabby forest.
- **Access** You've got three options to get to your gear: from the top; through a big, U-shaped zipper that peels back the padded backpanel; or via a smaller panel that opens on the front side.
- **Organization** Instead of internal avy gear storage, the Snowfield has a handy zippered side pocket for your probe and a pair of reinforced loops on the other side for the shovel handle; strap the shovel blade on the pack's front, or slip it into the front pocket. "I could grab my entire avalanche kit in less than five seconds, no fumbling," says one tester after a snow-safety course on Mt. Shasta. Two hipbelt pockets are big enough for snacks and a cell phone. But the zippered hydration tube sleeve on the shoulder strap is narrow and fussy.
- **Suspension** The wide, padded hipbelt and shoulder straps comfortably support loads up to 20 pounds.
- **\$149; 2 lbs. 10 oz.; 30 liters;** llbean.com



[MOST VERSATILE]
Black Diamond Dawn Patrol 32

Why we like it **It's the first pack we could use with or without Black Diamond's AvaLung system.**

- **AvaLung compatible** It won't keep you on top of an avalanche like an airbag system (see pages 69 or 111), but should you get buried it can prolong your survival time. You breathe through a tube, like a snorkel, at the top of the shoulder strap. It takes in clean air from the snowpack and expels CO₂-tainted air out the bottom. This is the first BD pack that lets you add the system (sold separately for \$100, 9.5 oz.) into a special compartment for days when you need it, while keeping the pack light and versatile enough for daily use.
- **Suspension** "I toted nearly 25 pounds of winter gear in total comfort on a day-long ski up Stevens Peak, Idaho," one tester says.
- **Access** There's no top access to the main bag, but the foam-and-plastic framesheet peels back to reveal the pack's entire contents. "The front pocket is for safety gear, the main compartment for my extra clothes," says one Washington tester. "And the roomy, 8-inch-long hipbelt pockets fit my granola bars and my camera." A nylon helmet sleeve tucks away into a hand-size pouch on top of the pack; we liked the convenience but wished there was less bounce.
- **\$160; 2 lbs. 9 oz.; 32 liters;** blackdiamondequipment.com



[ALPINIST'S CHOICE]
Grivel Zen 40

Why we like it **The low-profile design doesn't restrict arm swings or high steps.**

- **Packbag** Nearly every strap and accessory on this top-loading pack is removable or tucks neatly away when not in use, preventing snags on rocks and tree branches. The thin but wide hipbelt provides support for approaches, and then disappears into a slot when you're ready to climb. "I love the narrow packbag with its flexible backpanel that hugs my torso during awkward climbing moves," said one tester after 14 days in the Swiss Alps.
- **Comfort** The single 20-inch center stay does a good job of transferring weight to the hips with loads up to 30 pounds (good for a pack this size). Despite the pack's close fit, a central air channel with three diagonal channels on each side kept our tester's back from getting too sweaty, even on a 14-hour slog on the Mt. Blanc massif.
- **Durability** The Zen uses a lightweight nylon that's reinforced with carbon fibers for added strength (it's expensive, but the strength-to-weight ratio is off the charts). "I accidentally stepped on my pack with crampons while belaying," one tester admits. "I stood on it for a good 10 minutes before I noticed. Incredibly, there were no punctures."
- **Access** A simple, metal hook secures the toplid over the packbag: "It's super durable, secure, and really quick to operate one-handed."
- **\$200; 2 lbs. 6 oz.; 40 liters;** libertymountain.com

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[LOAD MONSTER]

Mystery Ranch Big Mountain

Why we like it **You can fill it up with 50 pounds for an expedition or cinch it down for summit bids.**

► **Suspension** "This is the Harley of big packs," says one tester. "It's completely kitted out, and the ride is heaven." An aluminum perimeter stay and two vertical fiberglass rods (on the sides of the plastic framesheet) transfer the load directly to the hipbelt; a single horizontal center stay prevents Goliath-size loads from barreling out and pushing into your back.

► **Versatility** Four V-pull compression straps keep big payloads tight and cinch the pack down to day-trip size. "I toted the pack into a High Sierra basecamp for a week-long trip, and, after I unloaded, carried it on summit attempts," says one tester. Only gripe: It's heavy.

► **Access** In addition to a cavernous top opening, a vertical, 30.5-inch center zipper splays open the entire front of the packbag for easy rummaging. You can remove the toplid to save 9 ounces.

► \$295; 5 lbs. 4 oz.; 65 liters; mystery-ranch.com



[GREAT FIT]

Dakine Heli Pro DLX 24

Why we like it **This full-featured backcountry ski and snowboard pack has the best women's fit of any model we tested.**

► **Fit** Unlike many women's packs that are simply smaller, colorful versions of men's models, the Heli Pro DKX fit our female testers (it's also available in men's) with no compromises. The backpanel is shorter than the men's equivalent (by nearly 2 inches), the width between the shoulder straps is smaller (at only 4.5 inches), and the canted hipbelt and narrower lumbar matched all of our testers' curves. Shoulder straps arc away from the breasts for a secure fit without pinching. "I have big hips and a tiny waist," says one tester who logged 27 ski days with the pack. "This is the best-fitting pack I've worn."

► **Ski & snowboard carry** "The snowboard sleeve between the framesheet and backpanel is the most comfortable and easiest to use that I've found," says one tester after more than 20 backcountry trips with the Heli Pro. "The heavily padded, stiff flap holds the board securely in place, with no wiggling or bruising, even when I hiked more than 1,500 feet to earn my turns." Tuck-away straps secure skis vertically or diagonally.

► **Organization** Avy gear fits neatly in the full-length front pocket. Access the roomy main packbag via a durable zipper that lets you peel back the front and top of the pack for a full view of the contents. "I love the fleece-lined, padded pocket for my goggles and lenses," said one tester after battling quickly changing conditions on Mt. Hood. Bonus: An insulated hydration tube sleeve on one shoulder strap kept our hose from freezing, even when temps dropped below 10°F (we were careful to always expel water from the tube).

► \$110; 2 lbs. 5 oz.; 24 liters; dakine.com

TREND REPORT

WHAT'S HOT IN WINTER PACKS

► **SAFETY**

Dedicated avalanche tool compartments designed for quick deployment are now standard. Some (like the L.L.Bean, page 90) let you access your probe without having to dig. The Bean pack has a separate exterior pocket with a 12-inch zipper for quick deployment.

► **MATERIALS**

Winter pack designers are finding light, robust materials (like the carbon fiber fabric in the Grivel Zen 40) to increase durability and water resistance without adding weight. And more companies are reinforcing straps with hypalon (a type of rubber) to protect them from sharp ski and board edges (and also prevent slippage).

► **HYDRATION COMPATIBLE**

Since bladder and hose systems have become so popular, many winter packs now offer insulated sleeves to keep the hose and bite valve from freezing. For best results, be vigilant about blowing water back into the reservoir after drinking.

[EDITORS' CHOICE]

SCOTT Air Free Alpride**High Sierra Symmetry 18****Mountain Hardwear Ozonic 65 OutDry**

Turn to page 65 to read about three of the year's best packs.



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[MUD SHOE]

Salomon Fellraiser

Why we like it **Aggressive lugs make this the best runner for muddy trails.**

► **Comfort** The Fellraiser's low weight gives it a no-frills trail runner feel, but the soft EVA footbed and mesh upper provide comfort for the long haul. "They feel great right out of the box," our tester says. "I wore them on a 7-mile run, followed by an eight-hour shift at work on my feet with no discomfort." Fit note: The narrow last is best for low-volume feet.

► **Traction** The outsole sports deep, 7mm, cleat-like lugs that gave us solid traction on mud-slicked and snow-covered trails in Washington and on loose scree in Northern California.

► **Breathability** The lightweight mesh upper vents well, drains quickly, and dries fast after creek crossings and puddle splashes (it's not waterproof).

► **Lacing** The speed lacing—just pull and cinch the plastic locking mechanism—is quick and easy. But the lock frequently slips, causing loose laces (and toe bumping on downhill sections if you don't retighten).

► \$110; 1 lb. 4 oz.; salomon.com



[WINTER RUNNER]

Icebug Zeal OLX

Why we like it **Metal studs in the outsole give hikers a claw-like grip on icy trails.**

► **Traction** No need for aftermarket traction devices or instep crampons with these made-for-winter trail shoes: Each sole is embedded with 16 carbide-tipped spikes (the same material that's on the tips of your trekking poles), which bite into even the crustiest, hardest, meanest terrain. Our Alaska tester ran more than 100 miles on everything from ice and snow to rock and gravel, and never missed a step. Caveat: It's not slippery or uncomfortable on pavement, but the crunching of the spikes gets real old real fast. And take them off before going inside and scratching the wood floor.

► **Durability** After 117 miles, they still look brand new. The reason? The Zeal's abrasion-resistant nylon upper has a polyurethane coating, which shed mud and held up against months of off-trail hiking and running in Alaska's Tongass National Forest. Tip: The polyurethane sidewalls (orange in above photo) add stiffness to the shoe, so allow for some break-in time before tackling long runs.

► **Support** The Zeal has TPU arch support and a minimalist feel; the EVA midsole is thin enough to retain flexibility, but the 6mm drop means the heel is just thick enough to provide cushioning for dayhikes with a 20-pound pack.

► \$185; 1 lb. 4 oz.; icebug.com

[ULTRALIGHT HIKER]

Altra Lone Peak NeoShell

Why we like it **A waterproof exterior and plenty of cushioning make this shoe comfortable for 20-plus-mile winter runs and hikes.**

► **Weather resistance** Most waterproof shoes feature a membrane bootie inside the foam and fabric of the upper. But the Lone Peak's upper places Polartec's waterproof/breathable NeoShell (used mostly in jackets) on the outside. The result: Water never gets the chance to penetrate the materials, so the shoes stay lighter, warmer, and dryer. Our feet felt immune during 12-hour days of trekking through bogs and snowfields in Sweden, and after 70 miles, the shoes remain waterproof.

► **Fit** A wide toebox allowed our toes to splay and gave plenty of room for foot swell on 20-mile days in California's Lassen National Volcanic Park.

► **Comfort** The super-thick (25mm) EVA midsoles make long days easier. "They just eat up all the trail noise," says our Sweden tester. "My longest day was 17 miles and I had zero soreness, despite lots of rock-hopping."

► **Traction** Multidirectional chevrons and X-shaped lugs bite into loose dirt and mud. Lugs placed directly under the metatarsals held their grip on gravelly uphill trails, and the outsole extends out from the heel about half an inch, which improves braking on steep descents.

► \$150; 1 lb. 11 oz.; altrarunning.com



[TOUGH LOW-CUT]

Oboz Bridger Low BDry

Why we like it **Hikers who don't need ankle support still get durable, protective construction.**

► **Durability** One tester pummeled a single pair of Bridger Lows for more than 1,000 miles of punishing terrain during a four-month trip through South America, and they held up extremely well. The reason? The combination of a thick leather upper and rubber toe and heel caps, which makes the shoes uncommonly resistant to abrasion.

► **Support** The thick, three-quarter length nylon shank gives the Bridger Low unusual stiffness for a low-cut hiker. "I hauled a 55-pound pack through the Ecuadorian Amazon for two weeks," our tester says. "These shoes could handle it."

► **Comfort** The waterproof/breathable membrane kept our feet dry and warm in near-constant rain and in temps down to 20°F. The torsional stiffness kept our feet from fatiguing on uneven trails, and the thick EVA midsole gave us plenty of cushion on long-distance hikes.

► \$140; 2 lbs. 4 oz.; obozfootwear.com





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[SUPPORTIVE AND CUSHY]
LOWA Phoenix GTX Mid

Why we like it **It's the best combination of comfort and protection in the lineup.**

- **Support** Our feet felt protected and pampered at the same time, thanks to a firm polyurethane midsole topped with a soft memory foam insole. That, combined with secure mid-height ankle support, enabled the Phoenix to handle 50-pound packs on steep inclines and off-camber trails in the Adirondacks.
- **Protection** The thick toe bumper and the leather-and-textile upper armored our feet when we were hiking off-trail through rocky terrain in British Columbia—all without any signs of wear.
- **Comfort** The memory foam insole gave these shoes a decadent, custom feel that became even more comfortable as we piled on the miles. The uppers conformed to our tester's wide feet after a few short hikes.
- **Traction** The sticky rubber and wide, triangle-shaped lugs held their grip on wet rocks and muddy trails, and the pronounced heel braked well on soft downhill trails.
- \$225; 2 lbs. 10 oz.; lowaboos.com



[BACKPACKING BEAST]
Asolo Avalon GTX

Why we like it **A rigid midsole and durable upper made this boot our choice for multiday trips with a heavy pack.**

- **Support** A dual-density EVA midsole provides torsional rigidity on the bottom with a soft, shock-absorbent layer next to the foot. This, combined with a springier EVA in the heel, provided more than enough support and cushion during a 20-mile hike in Leadville, Colorado, with a 35-pound pack (the Avalon can easily handle up to 50 pounds).
- **Durability** Metal eyelets, tough suede, and thick nylon in the upper held up well during rocky hikes in Colorado, and a polyurethane film protects the midsole from abrasion.
- **Fit** The Avalon is a high-volume boot, which leaves plenty of room for an aftermarket insole or thick socks on winter hikes.
- **Traction** The chunky lugs and prominent heel brake gripped well on everything.
- \$260; 2 lbs. 14 oz.; asolo.com



[WINTER WARMTH]
Vasque Pow UltraDry II

Why we like it **These insulated boots are ideal for winter overnights and snowshoeing.**

- **Warmth** "They feel like my sheepskin slippers," one tester. Credit the soft shearling fleece lining and 400 grams of Thinsulate insulation, which kept her toes cozy down to 0°F during winter camping trips in Colorado. (Sorry guys, these are women's only.)
- **Protection** Because the suede and textile upper is packed with insulation, it has some structure and stiffness, so we could crank down snowshoe bindings without feeling any pinching. The unusually thick rubber toecap prevented scuffing and stubbing, the waterproof membrane kept us dry when the snow turned to slush, and the high ankle cut (5 inches from the top of the heel cup) reduces the need for gaiters in deep snow.
- \$150; 2 lbs. 11 oz. (7); vasque.com

[WINTER DISTANCE BOOT]
KEEN Durand Polar WP

Why we like it **An insulated upper and stable platform make this ideal for cold winter treks with a heavy pack.**

- **Protection** A waterproof membrane and 400 grams of insulation kept the cold out in single-digit temps in the mountains above Lake Tahoe, and the tallest uppers in this test (tied with the Pow Pows) kept foot-deep snow out during off-trail slogs (no gaiters needed).
- **Comfort** The fleece-lined upper adds a touch of softness to the interior, and the reflective heat-shield in the footbed kept the cold from penetrating the bottom of the boot (we stayed warm down to 5°F). Fit tip: They run small; go up a half size, especially if you favor thick socks.
- **Support** One tester carried a 45-pound pack on a 15-mile hike through ankle-deep Sierra snow, and concluded the Durand is plenty stiff for winter loads. The support comes from a polyurethane midsole and TPU shank. The high ankle is reinforced with a double-layer of suede, which gave excellent support for those with vulnerable ankles.
- \$200; 3 lbs.; keenfootwear.com





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Sleeping Gear

[COLD WEATHER HAVEN] Big Agnes Storm King 0

Winter nights can drag when you're cooped up in your tent—and in your bag—which is why we love the roomy dimensions of this semi-rectangular sack. “Going from a mummy to this is like swapping a broom closet for an airplane hangar,” says one tester. “I could toss and turn freely, and even change clothes without unzipping the bag.” Credit the 70-inch shoulder circumference and 53-inch footbox (traditional mummies measure 60 and sub-40, respectively). The U-shaped draft collar and puffy draft tube behind the full-length zipper form an impenetrable barrier that seals in heat. While we only tested it down to 15°F, our tall Alaska tester would confidently take this down to single digits, but smaller bodies may have trouble warming up the extra room. The 650-fill duck DownTek keeps the price low for a 0°F bag. Tradeoff: All that extra room equals a bulky (8 by 17 inches) package. \$380; 3 lbs. 9 oz.; 0°F; bigagnes.com



[LIGHTWEIGHT WINTER BAG] Brooks Range Drift 0

Getting properly kitted for winter camping almost always requires a heavy pack, but this featherweight will help save ounces. Our cold-sleeping female tester raved about the Drift after enduring brutal weather on Kilimanjaro. “It was snowing, hailing, and 0°F at 15,000 feet, but I slept through it.” Vertical baffles keep down positioned on top of you (as opposed to falling to the sides, with horizontal chambers). Premium 850-fill goose DownTek and a feathery 15-denier nylon shell keep weight low, but designers didn't skimp on features like an extra hood draft tube and internal pocket. The bag crunches to 7 by 16 inches, which is on par with some three-season bags. The DWR-treated shell and hydrophobic down repelled moisture well; our tester didn't notice a cold spot when the bag was pressed against a soaked tent wall all night. Bummer: The full-length zipper is snaggy. And then there's the cost.

\$700; 2 lbs. 11 oz.; 0°F; brooks-range.com



[ULTRAWARM PAD] Exped DownMat Winterlite

We know down bags have the best warmth-to-weight ratio in their category, and the same goes for sleeping pads with feathers. The 700-fill goose feathers inside this mat provide an R-value of 7 (many four-season pads top out at 4) and give it the best warmth-to-weight/bulk ratio of any pad we've tried. “We slept with only a tarp in 20°F temps with light snow in Arizona's Blue Range, and I was warm every night of our 10-day trip,” says our cold-sleeping tester. The 3.5-inch-thick mat compresses to about the size of a 1-liter bottle, thanks to the mummy profile that tapers from 20.5 inches to an unusually narrow 13 inches at the feet. Bummer: not much rolling around space. Consider the 5-inch-wider version if you want elbowroom. Bonus: The pad is tough, thanks to the laminated shell treatment (most pads are simply coated). We spent two weeks in the high desert with no tent or groundcloth and the pad survived without a pop. \$209; 1 lb. 1 oz.; 20.5”x72”x3.5”; exped.com



Tents

[TWO-PERSON] NEMO Equipment Kunai 2P

Most four-season tents are only meant to be used in the fourth season, but not the Kunai. “It's light enough to justify carting around in the summer, but it's bomber enough for winter mountaineering expeditions,” says our Colorado tester. NEMO opted for a single door to shave weight, as well as a more minimalistic pole structure (a brow pole and only two cross poles instead of the more standard three). The floor plan feels snug at only 27 square feet, but headroom, at 42 inches, is good for a tent this size. On the flip side, the compact profile is perfect for enduring high winds in alpine environs. And guyline attachments pass through the fly and attach directly to the tent frame, making the Kunai a fortress when staked out. Walls are solid nylon to increase warmth. Two vents enhance airflow, but we had some condensation on rainy, near-freezing nights in Rocky Mountain National Park. Bummer: The 7-square-foot vestibule is tiny. \$500; 4 lbs.; nemoequipment.com





Kitchen

[WHITE GAS STOVE] MSR WhisperLite

It's been more than 20 years since this stalwart won one of our first-ever Editors' Choice Awards. And it's still the go-to liquid fuel stove for guides and weekenders alike, thanks to its reliable cold-weather performance and easy field maintenance. "It works no matter what the temp," says a Canadian climber who's used it down to -22°F. It's on the heavy side for summer trips, but if you want just one stove for all purposes, ever, the Whisperlite is a good bet. \$90; 11 oz.; cascadedesigns.com/msr



[SNOWMELT VESSEL] GSI Outdoors Halulite 4.7 L Pot

It takes a lot of snow to make a little bit of water, which is why, in winter, you want to carry the biggest pot you can handle. The hard-anodized aluminum Halulite offers an ideal balance between strength, weight, and cost, and doubles as a pot for home, car camping, or group trips in summer. It stays stable on our stoves thanks to the grooved base, the wide wire handles are easy to use with gloves on, and the lid works well as a scoop for snow. \$45; 1 lb. 6 oz.; gsioutdoors.com



[STOVE SYSTEM] Jetboil Joule

This 2014 Editors' Choice Snow Award-winner excels where no other canister model can thanks to its always-inverted design, which pulls fuel as a liquid, not a gas. The 2.5-liter pot with heat exchanger boils water super-fast; it's a snow-melting monster. The piezo igniter means you can fire it up with gloves on. But it's spendy, and we've only used it down to about 15°F. \$200; 1 lb. 12 oz.; jetboil.com



[HOT DRINKS] Thermos Brand Vacuum Insulated 25 oz. Stainless Steel Compact Beverage Bottle

Drinking a warm beverage doesn't just make you feel good, it actually raises your body temperature. Make sure you've got some all day long with this guide favorite. "It's simple, with a screwable pouring lid that keeps tea hot and makes serving up a cup easy," says a Washington winter veteran. \$30; 1 lb. 5 oz.; thermos.com



THE ULTRALIGHT WAY

If it's good enough for Justin "Trauma" Lichter's 2015 unprecedented winter PCT thru-hike, it's good enough for any UL diehard.

Most people don't think you can use alcohol stoves in the winter, but with the Trail Designs Sidewinder Ti-Tri Stove System (\$80; 1.5 to 3 oz.; traildesigns.com), Lichter and his partner Shawn "Pepper" Forry were able to sustain their 131-day trek on denatured alcohol, even in temps well below 0°F. The secret: the Sidewinder's conical windscreen is custom-made to hug your pot (nearly 30 windscreen models available), thus reflecting the stove's heat not just below but around it. To facilitate melting snow, Lichter's version of the Sidewinder system includes the 1.3-liter Evernew Ti Ultralight Pot #3 (\$70; 4.6 oz.; evernewamerica.com), a slightly larger version of what he uses in summer. They carried their alcohol fuel in a .5-liter Platypus SoftBottle (\$8; .8 oz.; platyp.com).

[3-PERSON] Sierra Designs Convert 3

Lavish space and low weight: These are not qualities you typically associate with four-season tents. Yet the 41.7-square-foot Convert 3 has both, as well as a modular vestibule system that let us cut nearly a pound for fast-and-light trips or add a vesti at each end for expeditions (it comes with a 17.1-square foot one; buy a second for \$120). It's a wind-shedding, three-pole, tunnel tent with a ridgepole that boosts headroom and adds rigidity. "It's not Everest-worthy because of the large, unsupported sidewalls and vestibule," says one tester. "But it held up fine to four nights on Rainier with sustained 25-mph winds. And it's light enough that I'd carry it on summer backpacking trips." The external pole system is fast and dry: The interior never gets exposed to precip during setup. \$690; 5 lbs. 15 oz.; sierradesigns.com





[BEST ALL-AROUND]

Salomon MTN Explore 95

Why we like them **There wasn't any terrain, line, or snow these skis couldn't crush.**

► **Versatility** Finding a ski balanced enough to excel at everything is like looking for buried treasure. But the MTN Explore marks the spot with a combination of control and responsiveness: The pronounced sidecut (the hourglass curve created by the different widths of the tip, waist, and tail) likes tight turns as much as big GS turns. The rockered profile has just enough float to keep tips up on powder days. And the core materials (poplar and carbon) make the ski feel predictable, playful, and powerful all at once. "I skinned up, then charged steeps and trees in the morning, then hit the resort for some bumps and groomers in the afternoon," one tester says.

► **Float** The MTN Explore—at 95mm underfoot—is considered narrow by today's powder ski standards. But thanks to the rockered, wide (130mm) tip it still "stays on top through every turn," reports one tester after a long day in 10-inch-deep powder on Colorado's Berthoud Pass.

► \$850; 6 lbs. 2 oz. (177); 169, 177, 184 (130-95-116, all lengths); salomon.com



[ULTRALIGHT]

Blizzard Zero G 85

Why we like them **They're feathery on the feet without sacrificing real downhill performance.**

► **Touring** No surprise: The lightest ski in our test was the favorite for long tours and uphill slogs where every extra ounce contributes to muscle fatigue.

► **Construction** This hybrid ski has sidewall (or sandwich) construction underfoot, which makes the Zero surprisingly stable for its relatively narrow (85mm) width, and gives it crazy-good control on edge. Cap construction in the tip and tail, in which the top sheet folds down over the edge of the ski, helps keep weight low, and tips absorb vibration and make high-speed turns as smooth as silk.

► **Responsiveness** Instead of fiberglass or extra wood, a full carbon-fiber layer extends along the length of the ski and sidewalls, making it both light and strong. Paired with the paulownia wood core (known for its low weight), the carbon makes it super rigid, so we could power it through turns on glades in Rocky Mountain National Park. Reality check: For deep powder, this ski doesn't have the width to maintain good float.

► \$720; 5 lbs. 3 oz. (178); 157, 164, 171, 178, 185 (116-85-99.5, all lengths); blizzard-ski.com

DON'T KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CAMBER AND ROCKER OR WHAT YOU WANT IN A SKI'S CORE? TURN TO **PAGE 62** TO LEARN ABOUT **USING AND CHOOSING BACKCOUNTRY SKIS.**



[HARD CHARGER]

Dynafit Chugach

Why we like them **These skis have the power to handle big mountain lines.**

► **Aggressiveness** "The harder you push this ski, the better it gets," says one tester. That's because of the full sidewall construction and the combo of wood (ash and poplar) and carbon inlays that make the Chugach stiff. Testers who didn't push it felt it lacked agility, while more aggressive testers couldn't get enough. Tradeoff: The skis felt heavy on the uphill.

► **Stability** Because of the long, flat section of ski underfoot (and subtly rockered tip and tail), you get more edge contact when you need it. This gives the Chugach the maneuverability of a serious steep-terrain ski—you can make solid turns to dump speed when things get spicy. As one big mountain rider put it, "It instills confidence."

► **Versatility** The Chugach is at home in most any snow, from mawk to sastrugi, and most any terrain, from mellow tours to steeps, but it shines when you put it on edge.

► \$800; 8 lbs. 8 oz. (181); 173 (134-106-124), 181 (135-107-125), 188 (136-108-126), 194 (137-109-127); dynafit.com

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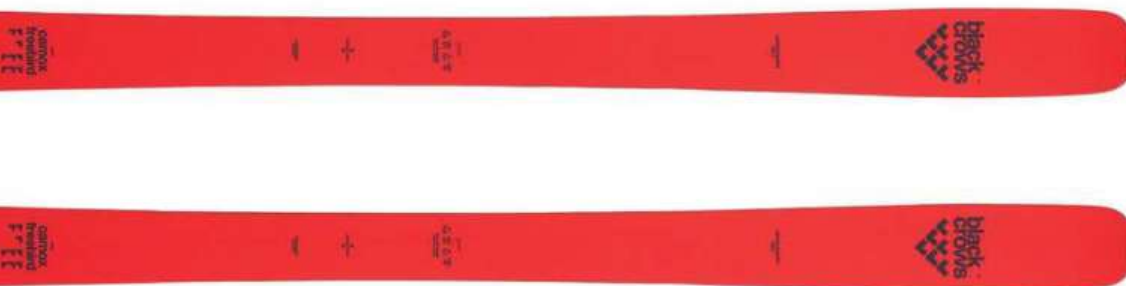
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[POWDER HOUND]
DPS Wailer 112RP2 Tour1

Why we like them **These playful, floaty skis let us dance through the fresh stuff.**

- **Float** The shape of this ski is all about hovering over deep snow: The shovel (the whole front section of the ski) is extra fat so you don't have to work to keep your tips afloat. It's a subtle difference that allows for better body positioning (you don't have to lean back to maintain control in powder).
- **Versatility** Despite its girth, the Tour1 is light enough for all-day climbing and stable enough to descend just about anything, too. But let it loose in the deep stuff, as one tester did on Colorado's Berthoud Pass? "I felt like the skis clicked into autopilot. It was effortless."
- **Construction** Considering their width, the Tour1s are superlight thanks to full-cap construction and balsa wood (the lightest wood used in skis) in the core. Carbon and fiberglass add stiffness without weight. Ouch: The Tour1 is nearly \$250 more than the next most expensive ski here. But if you're a backcountry powder junkie, it's worth every penny. Money-saving alternative: DPS offers this ski with a different core at a lower price, but they're a little heavier and don't perform at the same level.
- \$1,050; 6 lbs. (178); 168, 178, 184, 190 (141-112-128, all lengths); dpsskis.com



[ADVENTURE-SEEKER]
Black Crows Camox Freebird

Why we like them **Get maximum fun at a mid-range price.**

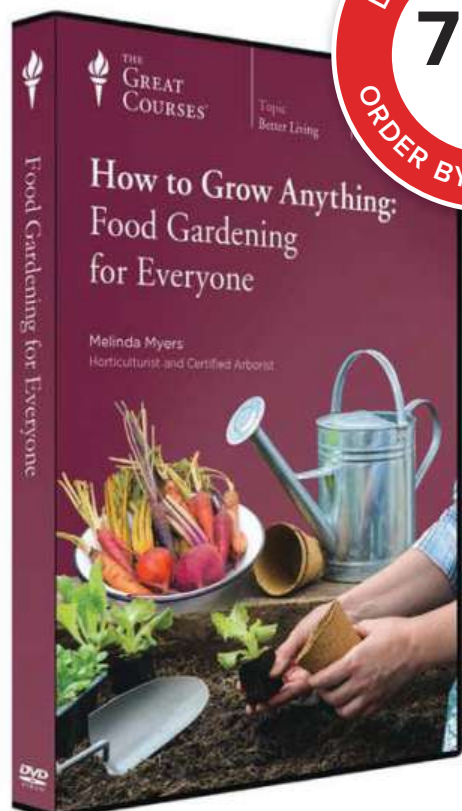
- **Responsiveness** "So stable, yet poppy," was a consistent comment on evaluation forms with this ski. A semi-cap or hybrid construction (similar to that of the Blizzard) provides extra stability underfoot for charging at top speed. We found the Freebird perfect for ripping through trees thanks to the slightly rockered tips, which create a shorter footprint for improved nimbleness.
- **Agility** This ski also proved adept in steep, icy couloirs where control is essential because the rockered tail allows you to release turns quicker under pressure. "I turned on a dime with minimal effort," noted one experienced backcountry skier after pushing his limits in chutes.
- **Float** The Camox Freebird's relatively narrow dimensions mean you get just average performance on powder days.
- \$760; 6 lbs. 14 oz. (171); 162 (122-97-110), 171 (125-97-112), 178 (128-97-114), 183 (130-97-115); black-crows.com/en



[POLES]
Backcountry Access Scepter Carbon Aluminum

Ski poles are ski poles, right? Wrong. The Scepter actually makes uphill travel easier, thanks to the multipurpose grip that offers extra leverage for uphill pushes. The plastic-and-rubber grip itself is fairly standard, but it also has a 3-inch-long extension that juts out over your hand. "I could really push off with my palm and use my arms more effectively on the uphills," said one tester after a five-day Colorado tour. The extended grip has other benefits, too: It let us easily scrape ice and snow off the tops of our skis, and it flips heel lifts on bindings without the normal fumbling. The Scepters collapse to 100cm and extend to 145cm, so one size works for most any skier. Bonus: The top portion of the upper carbon shaft (the bottom section is aluminum for better durability) has a grippy texture for a quick, easy handhold when re-adjusting pole length isn't feasible.

- \$120; 1 lb. per pair; backcountryaccess.com



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[ALL-DAY COMFORT]
Dynafit Winter Guide GTX

Why we like it **Top-notch walking comfort meets all-day warmth.**

► **Liner** It's about time designers figured out how to make thermo-moldable liners breathable. Thanks to a Gore-Tex membrane, this liner allows sweat vapor to escape through tiny perforations in the dual-density foam. (Find this same tech in the Superguide Carbon, next page.) In conditions where other boots would get swampy—like a 10-mile skin in 40°F temps—we couldn't wet out the Winter Guide.

► **Buckles** Before touring, fine-tune tightness for downhill skiing with standard ratcheting buckles, then flip the plastic catches to lock your sizing in place. When you

open the buckles for skinning, they can't shift or otherwise resize themselves, like standard buckles do. "It's so much easier to adjust tightness at the car or in camp than it is to do it on an exposed ridge with frozen fingers," one tester says. "With these, all you have to do on that woeful ridge is snap the buckles and then first tracks are as good as yours." Closing the buckles automatically locks the boot into ski mode, further streamlining the tour-to-ski transition.

► **Comfort** The Winter Guide isn't the lightest boot, but if you're going to be in it all day, standing around a lot (like, um, a winter guide), it's a solid choice. We wore them for a 3-mile skin with a 40-pound pack on a winter camping trip in Colorado's White River National Forest—then stayed in them all day at basecamp. "Why not? They're warmer, dryer, and cushier than my camp shoes," a tester says.

► \$700; 6 lbs. 12 oz. (27.5); dynafit.com

WEIGHTS ARE PER PAIR FROM THE MANUFACTURER.

TEXT BY MAREN HORJUS

**Tecnica Cochise
Custom Adaptive Shape
(C.A.S.) Liner**

Get personalized fit out of the box.

Ski boot liners typically require both professional thermal boot-fitting and actual days on the hill to form to your foot shape. Not the C.A.S. The dual-density foam booties are anatomically shaped for the right and left foot with punch-outs to accommodate the navicular bone, the first and fifth metatarsal heads, and the ankle and heel bones. They're also pinched in on the back to follow the natural curve of the Achilles. The result? "From the box to the hill to après—no pain," one tester says. And great fit also increases power transfer: "I never felt like I was sliding in my boots when initiating a turn on ice or mank," says another tester who guides in Alaska. And if you have exceptionally weird tootsies, don't worry: The microcell foam is still heat-moldable. Grind it up to 2mm in problem areas.

Currently available in the Cochise Pro 130, Cochise 120, and Cochise Pro W; tecnicausa.com



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[SIDECOUNTRY SPECIALIST]
SCOTT Superguide Carbon

Why we like it **It skis like a resort boot, but can hold its own on tours.**

► **Comfort** When we reviewed SCOTT's Cosmos II in 2014, we lauded its all-day comfort. Take that boot and give it more downhill chops and a Gore-Tex liner (like the Winter Guide, far left), and you get the Superguide Carbon, which has the same wide last (103.5mm) and 60 degrees of cuff articulation as its predecessor. "I spend a lot of time hiking, and my feet stay warm and dry," says a tester who manages the avy team at Lake Louise Ski Resort.

► **Downhill performance** Carbon inlays in this boot's lower shell keep it ultrastiff when muscling through turns, while the wide, clippable power strap mimics a fourth buckle, giving it the security of a true alpine boot without all the weight. That makes them a good choice for people looking for a backcountry boot that feels at home in the resorts. "They drive my fat resort skis better than any other AT boot I've tried," our Lake Louise tester says. Downside: They're on the heavy side if touring is your main objective—and pricey.

► \$1,000; 6 lbs. 4 oz. (26.5); scott-sports.com



[BARGAIN]
Dynafit Radical Women CR

Why we like it **You can't find a better balance of climbing and downhill performance at this price.**



► **Downhill performance** Option A: Beefy boots that hold their own on the steeps but feel constricting and sluggish when moving cross-country. Option B: Streamlined boots that move nimbly on tours but feel squirrely on the downhill. Option C: the Radical CR, now available for the fairer sex. Its four-buckle design, PU shell, and progressive flex give it downhill chops. We felt comfortable using them to drive both snappy and big skis in- and out-of-bounds. (Ding: All that stability weighs it down some.)

► **Touring** A generous last (100mm) and 60 degrees of ankle articulation in walk mode make these comfortable for touring.

► **Price** Cheapest option out there for the performance, hands down.

► \$550; 7 lbs. 6 oz. (25.5); dynafit.com



[EDITORS' CHOICE]
Atomic Backland Carbon

See page 65 to read about these ski boots that climb more comfortably than any others we've used.



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[BEST BINDING]

Atlas Treeline/Elektra

Why we like it **We could strap them on in 30 seconds flat.**

► **Binding** Perhaps the most critical part of a snowshoe, bindings sometimes freeze up in harsh conditions, or loosen over miles. Not these. A single-pull loop cinches the foot in place while a second strap secures the heel. The silicone material slides smoothly through the buckles: "These never froze, even when it was below zero and blowing snow on the east face of Grays Peak," said one Colorado tester after his summit of the Fourteener. The bindings are molded around gender-specific lasts (rare in snowshoes), making fit excellent across the board, even for small-footed women, who often get foot wiggle.

► **Walkability** The teardrop-shaped frames allow for a natural gait. "They feel like extensions of my feet," says one tester who logged more than 100 miles in the Treelines (the Elektra is the women's model). "I almost put a hole in our tent while pitching it because I forgot I had them on," says another. Props: A wire heel lift (for climbing) is easy to deploy with a trekking pole.

► **Flotation** The frame tapers gently from 8.5 inches down to 5.5 and offered the best flotation of any shoe we tested this year. "I only postholed twice in 120 miles," said a tester after dragging an 80-pound sled on a trip in Nova Scotia.

► \$240; 23, 25, 27, and 30 inches; 4 lbs. 2 oz. (m's 25); atlassnowshoe.com

[BEGINNER'S CHOICE]

Louis Garneau Boreal

Why we like it **The no-brainer binding and low price make these a great choice for newbies.**

► **Binding** A Boa closure system cinches the harness around your forefoot with a quick push-and-turn motion. "It's so easy, I could do it even with my puffiest mittens on," said one tester after a 30-mile trek in the Rockies. "Mid-hike tweaks were so quick that I didn't even bother to remove my pack before bending over."

► **Walkability** "I usually end up with sore hips from walking with a wide stance all day, but that didn't happen with the Boreals," another tester said after a 10-mile day in Colorado's Brainard Lake Recreation Area. "The length (we tested the 28-inch) kept me afloat while the narrower heel (7 inches) meant I wasn't tripping over my own feet," he said.

► **Traction** The toe crampon has ample teeth (six), but they're short and shallow, and there's no heel lift. "These snowshoes work great within their niche: mellow treks on rolling terrain," one tester says. "But when things got steep and dicey, the Boreals were out of their element."

► **Durability** The plastic frames can take a serious beating. "I threw these in the backseat with my dog," says our Colorado tester. "He got nibbly on them, but despite a few teeth marks, they came through unscathed."

► \$150; 22 and 28 inches; 4 lbs. 10 oz. (28); louisgarneau.com



[MOST PACKABLE]

GV Mountain Extreme ST

Why we like it **The removable bindings allow for flat packing.**

► **Binding** This unique step-in binding made life easy for a tester who used the Mountain Extremes on a four-day exploration around Uncle Bud's Hut in the Colorado Rockies. "Each morning, I'd just pull the rubber foot harness (it separates from the shoe) over my boot while I was still inside the hut," he says. "Then I walked outside and clicked my toes into the snowshoe deck (like a ski binding). I didn't even have to bend over." Undoing the binding is just as simple. Just press down on a tab with your trekking pole, shake your foot, and the frame pops right off.

► **Traction** Two seven-point crossbars, a toe crampon, and 24 side teeth equal unbeatable traction on ascents and descents. "Surfing is usually part of the deal while snowshoeing downhill, but not with these. They grab snow and hold onto it," reports one tester after a 1.5 mile, 1,600-foot descent in Alaska's Eaglecrest Ski Area. The heel lift prevented calf pain during ascents. Flaw: While the frames themselves work well for sidehilling, the step-in bindings make traversing uncomfortable—too much play in the foot.

► **Durability** Semi-rigid plastic decking is riveted to the tough aluminum frames. "The snow cover was thin on portions of our hike into the hut," says our Colorado tester. "I basically hiked 2 miles on a light dusting over a concrete road and all that's missing from the Extremes is a little bit of paint."

► \$270; 25 and 30 inches; 4 lbs. 11 oz. (25); gvsnowshoes.com



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[KILLER
VALUE]

Hillsound Freesteps6

Why we like
it **When a full
crampon is
overkill but
your boots
alone don't cut
it, get these.**

► **Traction** The Freesteps6 combines stainless steel chains and 21 spikes for maximum traction on moderate, mixed terrain

(on very steep pitches or solid sheets of ice, consider full-on crampons). "I used these on every single run this winter and they never failed, even on icy roads," said one upstate New York tester after 150 miles. An Alaska tester praised their grip after a 1,600-foot ascent on the icy Auk Nu Trail in the Tongass National Forest. "These cleats were lifesavers in sketchy conditions."

► **Fit** The elastomer harness remains flexible in subfreezing temperatures and fits a wide variety of footwear. "I could pull these over my bulky snow boots or my lightweight running shoes," says a tester. Tip: Be sure to precisely center your foot in the harness to prevent the spikes from migrating to the sides.

► \$40; 11.3 oz. (M); hillsound.com



[RUNNING SPIKES]

Kahtoola NANOSpikes

Why we like it **No more excuses for not running in winter.**

► **Traction** The low-profile NANOSpikes have 10 tungsten carbide studs per foot: six under the ball of the foot and four under the heel. "The roads were painted in ice but the NANO-spikes kept me from sliding all over like a newborn pony," reports one Denver-based tester. Caveat: Though they bite firmly into hard ice and packed snow, the spikes are too short (1/16 inch) to be effective on steep terrain.

► **Fit** The stretchy elastomer harness accommodates all styles of running shoes as well as lightweight boots.

► \$50; 8 oz. (M); kahtoola.com



splitboarding



[WEIGHT-SAVING BOARD]

G3 Scapegoat Carbon

Why we like it
It's one of lightest splitboards on the market.

- **Touring** It's made from feathery materials: a carbon weave wrapped around a poplar and paulownia core. This board won't weigh you down.
- **Powder performance** The tapered tail is designed for powder days; it naturally encourages the rockered nose to hover on top of the snow.
- **Agility** Carbon also provides extra torsional rigidity, making the Scapegoat easy to maneuver. "It was stable when I took big, broad, high-speed turns on Mt. Lassen, yet still agile when I found some deep stuff in the trees," reports our California tester.
- \$850; 5 lbs. 13 oz.; 158, 166, 174 (313/260/288); genuinegear.com

[SPEEDY BINDINGS]

Spark R&D Arc

Why we like it
Transitioning from touring to downhill mode is the Achilles heel of splitboarding, but the Arc saves time and hassle.



- **Touring** A streamlined design built for lightweight touring let us make adjustments in record time. Switching highbacks (the back part of the binding that cradles the calf) from tour to ride mode requires just the flick of a pole. Same goes for the easy-to-engage heel lift. "I could keep up with my skier friends, and spend more time shredding and less time fussing with my bindings," says one tester.
- **Weight** Cutouts in the binding's base plates help save weight and make stance adjustments possible without removing them from the board.
- \$385; 2 lbs. 15 oz. per pair; sparkrandd.com

[PERFECT-FIT BOOTS]

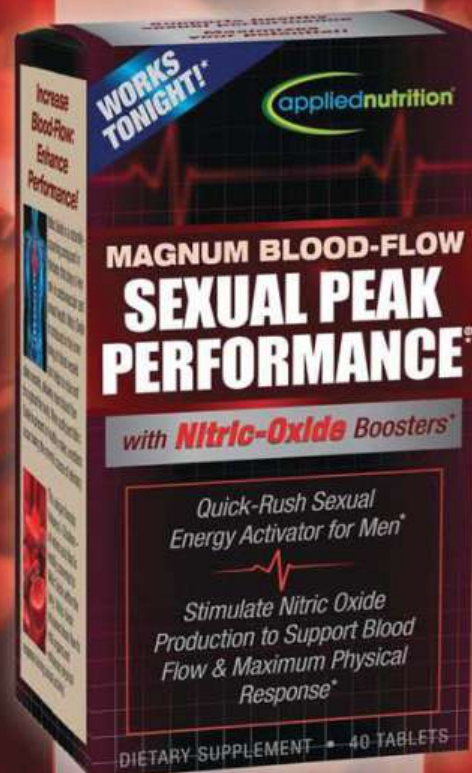
K2 Maysis+

Why we like it
You get maximum comfort and a perfectly tailored fit.

- **Fit** It's the most comfortable snowboarding boot we tested this year. A single Boa dial just above the ankle adjusts the Maysis+ in three zones—the upper, middle, and lower portions of the boot. "No matter what I was doing—touring or riding—I could quickly cinch my foot into place and hone in on the perfect amount of support and control," says our tester. The heat-moldable liner further customizes fit.
- **Traction** Grippy, knobby Vibram soles give the Maysis+ better-than-average traction, perfect for big-mountain adventures where scrambles and down-climbs into rocky couloirs can be expected. "Enough grip that even precarious steps felt solid," says our tester.
- \$370; 4 lbs. 8 oz. per pair; k2snowboarding.com



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[EDITORS' CHOICE]

SCOTT Air Free Alpride pack line

See page 65 to read about this travel-ready, lightweight, airbag pack.

[EXTRA-LONG SAW]

Black Diamond Snow Saw Pro

Why we like it [This is the most useful saw we've ever seen.](#)

- **Extendability** "Touring with this saw is like touring with an extension cord," one tester says. Affix the 35cm blade to the end of your ski pole with one of the included FlickLock connection pegs, and suddenly you have a few more feet of leverage. We liked being able to cut snow pits and bricks without hunching over, and one backcountry guide cut a cornice from a farther (safer) distance with the extra reach.
- **Packability** The saw collapses to about 16 inches inside its sheath—a touch bigger than a probe, but it can still fit in most packs' tool sleeves.
- \$80; 9 oz.; blackdiamondequipment.com



TEXT BY RYAN HORJUS

[EASY-TO-USE PROBE]

Mammut Probe 240 Fast Lock

Why we like it [The reliable locking mechanism allows for fuss-free deployments.](#)

- **Locking mechanism** With most probes, you pull the cord to align and lock sections into place with a clip or button. The problem is that if you release any tension when tugging the cord, the individual sections fall out of line. Since speed is essential when deploying a probe, Mammut solves this issue with a camming system that locks the cord in place even if you release it, like a cam cleat on a sailboat. When you pull the cord taut, spring-loaded cams pinch it, only retracting when you release the locking mechanism. The individual sections have tapered inserts, which help them slide into each other and align. "It means that you never have a bad toss or need to individually connect loose sections," one tester says. "It locks perfectly into place every time."
- **Weight** Carbon construction shaves ounces, which is always nice for a piece of equipment you carry everywhere, yet hope to never use.
- \$75; 9 oz.; mammut.ch

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

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[DO-IT-ALL SHOVEL]

Black Diamond Evac 7 Shovel

Why we like it **It's light, tough, and converts to hoe mode.**

► **Versatility** Whether we wanted to cut through hard muck or move pixie dust, this shovel did the trick. We could use it in shovel or hoe mode, and, through long shoveling sessions when we were digging snow pits in Rocky Mountain National Park, the D-shaped handle proved more comfortable than the more common T. The handle extends up to 37 inches and down to 26, so we could customize the length depending on the task at hand: standing to create a pit or on our knees moving debris. Fun feature: You can slip a Sawzall blade in the shaft to create a snow saw.

► **Packability** The downside of the D grip? Harder to stow in our packs. One tester preferred disassembling it into three pieces (blade, shaft, grip), but that made it slightly more cumbersome to put back together.

► **Weight** For a shovel of its caliber, the Evac 7 is one of the lightest options on the market.

► \$80; 1 lb. 13 oz.;

blackdiamondequipment.com



[FEATURE-RICH AIRBAG PACK]

Backcountry Access Float 32

Why we like it **Get your favorite backpack features in an avy pack.**

► **Comfort** Since avy airbag systems add 4 to 8 pounds to a pack, manufacturers typically strip out features to keep weight low. Not the redesigned Float 32, which has an EVA foam backpanel, a 4-inch-wide hipbelt, adjustable torso length, and articulated shoulder straps—making it feel and carry like a standard backpack. It's a touch heavier than comparable airbag packs, but we appreciated the added comforts. "I removed the airbag and used it as a resort pack," one tester says. Features include dual ice axe carriers, a fleece-lined goggle pocket, and an internal mesh pocket.

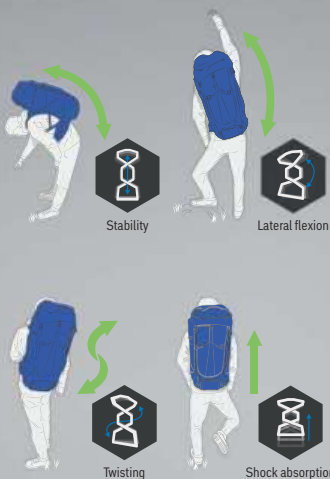
► **Air system** BCA's compressed air cylinder, while slightly heavier than other companies' alternatives (and not TSA-friendly), is far easier to get refilled: Take it to your local paintball or SCUBA shop and refresh it for around \$10.

► \$550; 9 lbs. 5 oz. (pack with airbag and full cylinder); backcountryaccess.com

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[BARGAIN] K2 Source

Why we like it **Get two lenses for the price of one—and the best case on the market.**

- **Lens swapping** Thumbnail-size connection points are easy to handle with gloves on: Flick them open and switch between the dark emerald- and light amber-tinted lenses.
- **Case** Skier's conundrum: Do you tote spare lenses in a heavy, brick-size hard case or a soft sleeve that leaves them vulnerable to damage? Enter the Source's included case: It has a hard shield to protect lenses, but packs down flat. "Finally, a case I actually take with me into the backcountry," one tester says. We liked stowing it in our thigh pockets for easy access.
- **Fit** Enjoy massive field of vision with the oversized lenses. Folks with smaller faces felt pressure on their nose bridges, though.
- **\$125; 4.2 oz.; k2skis.com**



[EDITORS' CHOICE UPDATE] Smith I/O Asian fit

Why we like it **Now one of the best interchangeable series on the market fits more face shapes.**

- **Fit** This new fit mold helps the I/O's sit flush on more faces by accommodating a lower nose bridge and higher cheekbones. Don't overlook these based on the name: Many of our female testers and a few (non-Asian) males preferred this fit to the regular I/O's. "I have a rounder face and lower brow bone, so most goggles engulf my face," one male tester says. "But these sit on my face right against my helmet, without putting pressure on my nose."
- **Technology** In the new fit, you get the anti-fog tech that won these an Editors' Choice Snow Award in 2012: Etching on the inside of the lens increases surface area to disperse moisture. You also get the same quick-release lens changing system, two spherical lenses (low- and high-light options), and quick-release buckle.
- **Starting at \$180; 4 oz.; smithoptics.com**



[BEST AIRFLOW] Julbo Aerospace

Why we like it **Pop the lens away from the frame for instant ventilation.**

- **Venting** With Julbo's new SuperFlow system, the lens pulls a centimeter away from the frame, allowing maximum airflow. The unprecedented venting system kept us fog-free even on the highest-output activities (like touring uphill in a blizzard), but the foam still felt hot against our faces (so we stuck with shades when there wasn't any precip).
- **Lenses** In lieu of multiple lenses, you get one photochromic lens that allows up to 42 percent of light or as little as 7 percent to pass through. It eliminates the hassle of switching (and packing spares), but, since it changes tints based on UV (which can be strong even on gray days), it can over-darken in low light. Note: Some of our male testers thought the frames were too small on larger faces, limiting peripheral vision and creating gaps between helmet and goggle.
- **\$220; 3.9 oz.; julbousa.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY



[TOURING SHADES]
Costa Rooster

Why we like it **Huge coverage protects the eyes, while unique temple fins block glare and vent at the same time.**

► **Frames** The nylon frames sport rubberized lining on the temples and nosepiece to keep them in place. Built-in side shields limit glare, while gills promote airflow. "You get the coverage of goggles, but the breathability of sunnies," said one tester after using them for both ascents and descents in the Lake Louise backcountry.

► **Lenses** The polarized 580 lenses filter out yellow and ultraviolet blue light. Cutting the former basically makes the scenery prettier (by enhancing blues, greens, and reds) and ups contrast (great for snowy conditions). Costa claims that cutting the latter reduces haze, which our testers affirmed.

► **\$189** (with polarized mirrored 580P lenses); 1.2 oz.; costadelmar.com



[BEST ALL-AROUND]
Arnette Specialist

Why we like it **Reasonably priced polarized lenses look totally stylin'.**

► **Venting Functional fashion:** Notches in the frame on either side of the nosepiece (called a keyhole bridge) promote both the hot rod look and ventilation. During high-output activities, like ski touring and trail running, air circulated through the cutouts, preventing fogging.

► **Temples** Each pair comes with two pairs of interchangeable arms: a thick, 16mm option (better for blocking peripheral glare) and a thin, 12mm option (pictured; shaves bulk). An included, quarter-size key lets you remove and reattach the temples. Gripe: The key isn't a standard screwdriver size, so if you lose it, you better have a strong thumbnail.

► **Lenses** Choose between dark gray or mirrored blue options (both polarized). We preferred the former for summit missions.

► **\$130**; .8 oz. (with thin arms); arnette.com



[TRAIL RUNNER'S PICK]
Nike Show X2

Why we like it **They stay put no matter how hard you're working.**

► **Custom fit** Mold the totally adjustable, rubberized nosepiece and temples to perfection. The ribs on the nosepiece promote venting, and our testers found that they also contribute to the secure fit (with more points of contact on the nose bridge, they stay put even when you're sweating). Everyone from men to small-faced women enjoyed the compact shape and full wrap.

► **Lenses** The changing mechanism is refreshingly easy: No switches, buttons, levers, or flexing plastic—just pull the lens downward from the outer corner. Slide the lens into the groove and pop it back into the same corner. You get two options when you buy one frame: We liked Grey Silver Flash (mirrored dark gray, ideal for above treeline) and Outdoor (copper, great for treed areas).

► **\$156** (with the recommended lenses); .7 oz.; nikevision.com



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[HEADLAMP] Petzl MYO

Why we like it **It's the brightest option in its weight class.**

are fresh). "We set up a basecamp 100 feet from a climbing crag, and at night I could shine my headlamp toward the rock wall and point out the next day's routes," one tester says. The MYO has 10 other modes, ranging from 20 lumens (perfect for reading) to strobe. Gripe: no red light.

► **Power regulation** Most headlamps gradually dim as the batteries drain. The MYO regulates the power output in everything but the highest (280 lumen) setting, delivering the exact brightness you've chosen for a predictable amount of time. The included handbook outlines the estimated times for each setting, such as five hours for 110 lumens (great for night hiking) and 40 hours for 20 lumens. A tiny, yellow LED indicates when your batteries have 30 percent power left and a red one when they hit 10.

► **Customization** You don't cycle through all modes; rather, you preselect three (using the two buttons on the headlamp). We liked being able to swap different ones in when circumstances called for it. "I changed out two of the higher output modes for two lower-level ones before a longer trip to ensure that I wouldn't burn through my batteries," one tester says. It takes some getting used to, but after you memorize the sequence of buttons, switching modes in and out of the rotation is easy.

► \$100; 6.2 oz.; petzl.com



[POV CAMERA] GoPro HERO

Why we like it **Quality POV filming comes to the masses.**

► **Features** For amateur filmmakers, this simple action

cam is a game-changer. It shoots 1080p video at 30 frames per second—that's great quality for recreational use. Battery life allows for a little more than two hours of recording time at that resolution. An Auto Low Light mode changes frame rates based on outside lighting, allowing us to move between bright (summit) and dim (treed) environments without fiddling. Gripe: It only shoots 5-megapixel still images (lower quality than your smartphone).

► **Ease of use** There are just two buttons, so it's easy to master.

► **Weight** Because the camera and housing is one integrated unit, this is the lightest POV camera on the market for the price.

► \$130; 3.9 oz.; gopro.com

[POWER ANYWHERE] myCharge All Terrain

Why we like it **This is the most durable (and waterproof) portable battery we've seen.**

► **Durability** This palm-size device-charger is as adventure-ready as you are. A rubberized exterior absorbs shock and improves grip. It's rated at IP68, which means it's fully dust- and waterproof. It's also drop-proof to 2 meters, but, in one case (oops!), it careened 50 feet down a talus field and wasn't damaged.

► **Power** 3,000 mAh equals about 1.5 iPhone 6 charges.

► \$40;
3.5 oz.;
mycharge.com



[PHONE CASE] Catalyst Waterproof iPhone Case

Why we like it **Get total protection without compromising sound quality.**

► **Protection** This two-piece, dust- and waterproof case protected our phones through a year of adventuring. After six months of hard use, we noticed a little wear and tear around the corners, but it didn't compromise waterproofness.

► **Ergonomics** The barely-there touchscreen film was never finicky, even with sweaty fingers or in light rain. Catalyst claims the proprietary membrane over the earpiece allows sound to pass through the film unimpeded: All we know is that sound quality is best-in-class for a shell case.

► **Shape** We appreciated the ultra-slim profile, which let us stow our iPhones (available for 4, 4S, 5, 5S, and 6) in hipbelt and pants pockets.

► \$70; 1.6 oz. (iPhone 6); catalystcase.com



[GPS WATCH] Garmin Epix

Why we like it **It's the first GPS watch to show actual relief maps.**

► **Mapping** GPS watches are great for tracking your route, coordinates, and speed, but those features are only helpful when compared to a physical map. Otherwise, the black dotted line on your screen doesn't tell you much. Enter the EPIX, which is the first wearable GPS that displays colored relief maps (buy and pre-load the ones you want or pay \$50 to get a 1:100,000 U.S. topo up front) on its 1.4-inch, high-res touchscreen. "I could check my location on the fly to make sure I was headed for the right drainage," said one Colorado tester after a tour in the Indian Peaks Wilderness. With 8 gigs of internal memory, it can hold a whole region at a time, so you don't need to swap out maps before local trips.

► **Features** It has all the standard GPS functions—altimeter, barometer, and three-axis compass—but it actually links two satellite systems (the usual GPS and another called GLONASS), giving it a top-class signal. With the GPS on, the battery lasts up to 24 hours (turn it off overnight and when you don't need a signal). Bonus: It's waterproof to 50 meters.

► \$549; 3 oz.; garmin.com



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[COMPRESSION]

CEP Progressive+ Ski Merino Compression Sock

"Yes, they're a struggle to put on, but they're totally worth it." That was the consensus among our crew of ski testers, who felt that the increasing pressure from calf to ankle promoted more endurance when climbing, compared to other compression socks we've tried. There's plenty of research out there that proves compression helps both performance and recovery, so don't take our word for it. But if you want to try it, this sock (though pricey) is a great place to start. The super-tight knit pattern creates the snug fit, but it also promotes durability: They're guaranteed to hold their shape through 180 washes. The blend of nylon (67 percent), merino (23), and spandex (10) moves moisture well, too.

► \$65; 3.3 oz.; cepcompression.com

[SUPERWARM HAT]

Columbia Flashforward Packable Down Hat

It's a down coat for your head. Just like your favorite puffy, the Flashforward has baffles filled with 800-fill goose down, which translate into maximum warmth for minimum bulk and weight. "It's the perfect lid for cold rest stops and hanging at basecamp after a long day of touring," one Alaska tester says. Though too warm for serious aerobic activity except in extreme cold, the soft polyester lining feels good against your head. And it packs down to the size of a deck of cards—smaller than most wool hats. Gripe: On large heads, it doesn't cover ears.

► \$35; 1.5 oz.; columbia.com

[BREATHABLE
GAITERS]**Rab Latok Alpine Gaiter**

"Gaiters often trap so much sweat they make my feet steam up, but this pair offers the ideal blend of breathability and protection," says our tester, who wore them on snow climbs in the Chilean Andes and waterlogged hikes in Mt. Rainier National Park. The eVent membrane minimizes moisture buildup, tough nylon around the ankles stands up to crampons, and a sticky, easy-to-adjust underfoot strap keeps them firmly in place when you're postholing.

► \$65; 8 oz. (M); rab.equipment/us/



[ULTRALIGHT HELMET]

Salomon MTN LAB

We've tested plenty of streamlined helmets before, but never one this light. At only 10 ounces, it's ideal for people who feel hindered by traditional helmets, since a helmet you won't wear can't help you. "I actually forgot I was wearing it," said one tester after making it up (and down) the north face of Colorado's 14,360-foot La Plata Peak. The MTN LAB is certified for skiing and mountaineering—which means protection against impacts from the side (think skiing wipeout) and top (rockfall from above). A dial at the base of the neck adjusts the inner fit system, so you can adapt to a thin beanie on cold days.

► \$200; 10 oz.; salomon.com

[MIDWEIGHT GLOVE]

Outdoor Research Extravert

Spring conditions can be more challenging than deep winter for gloves. Basically you want a softshell—breathable, weather resistant, lightly insulated—for your hands. These goat leather-palmed gloves are the best we found for the job. When we chugged uphill hard, the Extravert never wet out from sweat, and when the weather produced fat, wet snowflakes on a late-season ski tour in Colorado's San Juans, moisture never penetrated the stretch-nylon outer, either (though they're not waterproof). Dexterity is superb, thanks to precurved construction, which mimics the shape of the hand in resting position. The long, stretchy cuffs kept a photographer's wrists covered when he was lying prone in the snow and kept his digits cozy even while he was standing around in 20°F temps waiting for a shot. Gripe: We wished they had wrist leashes.

► \$75; 5.2 oz.; outdoorresearch.com



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[NOSE PROTECTOR]

Beko Classic

Go ahead and laugh. Stare. Make up nicknames (yes, we've heard Beak Man). Not only does this schnoz shield deflect UV and cold wind, it's also immune to insults. The proof is in the results: We've cooked our noses for decades in the alpine sun, then frozen them to all shades of red in the winter, but no more. The nose shield connects to sunglasses via a Velcro strap (also available with a sticky pad for goggles and a hook that works with prescription specs) and stayed put against 40-mph wind-driven snow, while the fleece backing kept our snouts warm. And sun? Not even a trace of pinkness. We're declaring victory for the nose.

► \$10; .3 oz.; bekogear.com



[NO-SAG SOCKS]

Fox River VVS UL Pro Ski Sock 5990

"Just as snug on the last day as the first," one tester said after wearing these socks throughout a four-day backcountry ski tour in Colorado. Right- and left-specific socks prevent bunching, while 3-percent spandex maintains the foot-hugging shape. A blend of merino (35 percent), silk (15), and nylon (47) strikes a great balance between warmth, softness, and durability. It's pretty thin, so don't expect it to swallow up a ton of room in your boot, but thicker reinforcements on the heel and toe gave us cushion where we needed it.

► \$22; 4 oz. (men's L); foxsox.com



[EDITORS' CHOICE]

Giro Range

Turn to page 65 to read about this supremely comfortable helmet.



[TOASTY MITTS]

Columbia Platinum 860 Turbodown

When warm fingers are a lifeline, these mitts are an insurance policy. Our tester took the 860s on a multiday ice climbing expedition in New York's Adirondacks, where temps bottomed out at -21°F and humidity spiked to near 100 percent. While he stood belaying on a ledge, he found the mitts both warm and, critically, dextrous enough to work ropes without compromising his partner's safety. Credit the one-two punch of 800-fill down layered over 60 grams of Columbia's Omni-Heat synthetic insulation for the warmth, as well as an OutDry membrane for defeating moisture. "I wore them in heavy spring snow and even put them through a dunk test," says our tester, "and they didn't leak, even at the seams." Dexterity comes from a precurved design and a shell made with 10 percent elastane. Fit was good for most testers, but those with the biggest meathooks found them snug across the palm.

► \$130; 8.8 oz.; columbia.com

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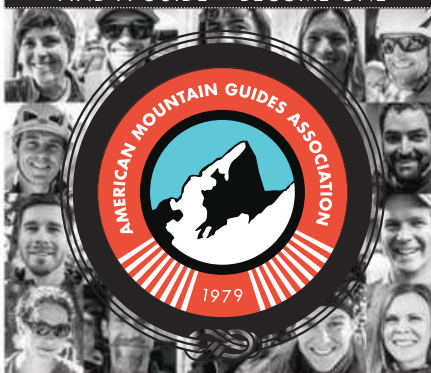


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Kristin Hostetter

Why we like her When it comes to gear, she's like the Pope: inspired by a supernatural force and pretty much infallible.

- **Durability** As the longest-standing BACKPACKER employee, with two-plus decades on the job, Kristin has more staying power than a geodesic dome-style tent with 70-denier nylon floors and well-placed guylines.
- **Versatility** Kristin is to gear testing what treated down is to puffies. And if your pad pops or your stove breaks, she'll fix it. "Or," says one tester, "tell you to toughen up."
- **Accents** You can take the girl out of the city, but you can't get rid of a Boston accent, especially after a few pulls from the whiskey bottle at one of the gorgeous campsites she gets to stay in all the time because her job RULES!
- 47 (age); 135 lbs.*



Kelly Bastone

Why we like her Living in Steamboat Springs, Colorado (where winter spans seven months), she's ideally positioned to test foul-weather gear.

- **Thoroughness** Kelly bulldogs after the tiniest bits of info that our editors have just got to know. And when we ask for five times more info than will fit, she doesn't flip out. Drawback: Her vast knowledge can make her colleagues feel like hacks.
- **Speed** The tradeoff for such painstaking product testing and research? Delivery speed. "Kelly works slower than a caterpillar crossing Velcro, but her stuff is top quality," says a tester. "She won't put her name on anything that isn't perfect."
- **Reliability** Bastone is on point 99 percent of the time. The other 1 percent? Pow days, her only known weakness.
- 42; 120 lbs.



Will Rochfort

Why we like him Our favorite teetotaler, he will schlep all your beer into a backcountry hut and not drink a drop.

- **Responsiveness** After spilling a bowl of boiling soup in his lap while testing some ultra-thin desert hiking pants, he leapt to his feet before any permanent damage occurred. This also earned him the trail name "Teflon Loins."
- **Personality** His unrelenting optimism can make the best of any situation. Downside: It can, on occasion, irk his hiking partners. "If I wanted to feel like I was in an episode of 'Parks and Rec' with Rob Lowe, I would have stayed home and watched Netflix," says one tester.
- **Bonus** Will has a penchant for working words like "penchant" and "scintillating" into 21st century conversation. "I have no clue what that guy is saying," confesses one editor.
- 33; 175 lbs.



Billy Brown

Why we like him He's one of the most versatile (and rugged) writers on our roster.

- **Dedication** Billy puts himself through as much hell as the gear he reviews, from getting swept 50 yards downriver while testing waterproof packs to sliding down a muddy cliff outside Bogota, Colombia, while testing boots. Ding: Billy's testing methods may shorten his long-term usefulness.
- **Personality** "Optimistic bordering on delusional," says one tester. His constant use of phrases like 'All these mosquitos really up the adventure factor out here' make me worry about Billy's grasp on reality."
- **Versatility** Handy with a circular saw. Ding: Not so handy at deciding when to use it (rough-cut boot cross-sections tell their own story).
- **Close-up ready** There's no one we'd rather see post a shirtless selfie on Facebook. Billy *always* delivers.
- 34; 184 lbs.



Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan

Why we like her She gets more excited about cross-country skiing than anyone else we know (it's a Midwest thing).

- **Performance** In pursuit of excellent testing data, Elisabeth has postholed up to her armpits, battled 70-mph winds, and once slept floating on a sleeping pad in an inch of freezing rain pooling in her tent—all so you don't have to!
- **Dedication** Went to South America—twice—this year in pursuit of the most exotic testing anecdotes. Came back covered in exotic fly bites.
- **Specialty** Persuading family and friends to accompany her on "fun trips" that invariably end with the phrase "death march" getting thrown around a lot. Side benefit: Survive a death march, earn a BFF.
- 33; 135 lbs.

*ALL WEIGHTS, UNLESS NOTED, ARE FOR ONE HUMAN (EGOS EXCLUDED) WEIGHED ON HIS/HER OWN SCALE/RECOGNIZANCE.

OTHER TESTERS Chris Abercrombie, Ted Alvarez, Jim Bailey, Heather Balogh, Keri Bascetta, Jon Bausman, Jillian Betjtlich, Jean Belanger, Hand Berg, Christine Blackmon, Ryan Bolan, Logan Boom, Nathan Borchelt, John Bouchard, Nancy Bouchard, Jason Boyle, Andrew Bydion, Stasia Callaghan, Donna Campbell, Irwin Campbell, Jason Champion, Toby Citret, Tom Coffin, Marty Combs, Matthew Combs, Tob Coppo-lillo, Jimmy Costakis, Matt Cullen, Jordan Curet, Mike Dahl, Michael Dimitri, Travis Dobson, Dorn Van Dommelen, Puck Van Dommelen, Jonathan Dorn, Sheila Eagan, Shawn Edmondson, Nick Elges, Rob Ender, John Ewing, Wendy Ewing, Nian Felsenthal, Greg Floyd, Bill Gaines, Heather Gannoe, John Gibbons, David Gordon, Hank Grant, Scott Groundwater, Jessi Hackett, Carla Hammer, Greg Hanscom, Eric Hanson, Greg Harris, Scott Hefel, Cindy Hirschfeld, Maren Horjus, Ryan Horjus, Steve Howe, Ryan Irving, Jon Jay, Shelli Johnson, Peter Jones, Amy Juries, Laura Katers, Matt Kennedy, Trent Knoss, Danny Kramer, Jessica Kuzma, Beth Lakin, Mike Lanza, Justin LaVigne, Patrice LaVigne, Alex Lee, Katie Levy, Mike Lewis, Rob Lewis, Dennis Lewon, Andy Liefer, Justin Lichter, Max Luczkow, Casey Lyons, Ryan Mauser, Annette McGivney, Dan McMillan, Ellen McMillan, Megan Melamed, KT Miller, Dex Mills, Matt Moseley, Ben Nachtrieb, Bryan Nanista, Dan Nash, Tyler Noonan, Joel Nyquist, Jonathan Olivier, Laura Onstot, Aaron Palmer, Shayla Paradesi, Nate Parker, Dave Petch, Cristina Peterson, Drew Peterson, Kim Phillips, Matt Piel, Steve Pulford, Kristin Richardson, Justin Riley, Peter Rives, Tracy Ross, Kel Rossiter, Adam Russell, Crystal Sagan, Kristie Salzmann, Mark Sanseverino, Gerben Scherpbier, Jeff Schwartz, Scott Simper, David Skinner, Joshua Smith, Matthew Sowards, Becca Stubbs, Nick Sutton, Corey Szapacs, Ben Thompson, Kristine Thompson, Paige Townsend, Alli Vagnini, Ryan VanGasse, Matt Vellone, Jan Voigt, Jessica Rae Williams, Aja Woodrow, Coleman Worthen, Ben Wu, Eli Zabielski, Rachel Zurer, Arianne Zwartjes

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